

THE MAN
AT
WILLOW
RANCH

BINDLOSS

THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH



HAROLD BINDLOSS

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THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

LARRY OF LONESOME LAKE
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MYSTERY REEF
THE LONE HAND
THE DARK ROAD
THE GHOST OF HEMLOCK CANYON
THE BROKEN TRAIL
PINE CREEK RANCH
PRAIRIE GOLD
CROSS TRAILS
CARSON OF RED RIVER
GREEN TIMBER
THE WILDERNESS PATROL
THE BUSH-RANCHER
NORTHWEST!
THE MAN FROM THE WILDS
THE BUCCANEER FARMER
FOR JACINTA
KIT MUSGRAVE'S LUCK
LISTER'S GREAT ADVENTURE
THE LURE OF THE NORTH
THE WILDERNESS MINE
WYNDHAM'S PAL
HARDING OF ALLENWOOD
ALTON OF SOMASCO
THE GREATER POWER
THRICE ARMED
THURSTON OF ORCHARD VALLEY
THE CATTLE BARON'S DAUGHTER
THE DUST OF CONFLICT

THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH

By HAROLD BINDLOSS



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THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH

I

THE WILDFOWLER

A PUFF of wind touched the water, and Hugh Nicol pushed his numbed hand under his oilskin coat. Since the tide went strongly up the firth, he need not use the short paddle, which, fastened by a line, trailed alongside the punt, but if he pulled it on board clumsily, the deck might echo the shock like a sounding-board. On a frosty night a jarring noise carries far, and widgeon are suspicious birds. Moreover, unless he could warm his stiff fingers, the blade might splash when he stole up to the flock.

The wind dropped, and, lying on the punt's floor, he looked across the bundle of straw in the bows. In front, the full moon rose from the misty plain that rolls between the Solway and the Pennine moors. To port, for Hugh steered east, the Scottish hills melted in the sky; on the other side, he saw the wide flats and marshes in Cumberland.

The flat-bottomed, decked punt was eighteen feet long, and nearly three feet in beam; her bow and stern were pointed. The big gun she carried weighed about seventy pounds, and when two passengers were on board, her deck was three or four inches above the water. Now Hugh was alone, she would float where the tide rippled across the shoals, but if she took the ground at an awk-

ward spot, she might be buried in the sand the savage stream churned up. When the moon is full, the Solway tide goes as fast as a man can run.

Hugh reckoned the time eleven o'clock. In the Irish Sea, high water was at twelve, but one must allow another hour for the flood to reach the shallows up the firth. The current carried him steadily and swiftly along, and, lying behind the gun, with some straw between his body and the floor-boards, he was not remarkably cold. Anyhow, he had known worse cold in France and Canada.

Harsh noises pierced the calm. A big black-backed gull called on a jarring note, and broad wings fanned. Screaming oyster-catchers wheeled across the punt, and in the distance Hugh heard a queer double pop, as if a cork were twice pulled from a large bottle. Somebody with a ten-bore hunted the bean geese by the beckfoot and had got a shot. The second report was but the echo on the water.

Where the bottom was uneven the current broke in small angry waves; the undermined banks of island sands crumbled and splashed, and the ice that had come down the Scottish rivers was going back up the firth. The long floes shocked, and where one grounded, the ice splintered with a tinkling noise like breaking glass.

In hard weather, punt-gunning is a strenuous sport, but Hugh was young and sprang from sturdy yeoman stock. The English yeoman has not yet altogether vanished from the North, and the Nicols had for long owned the soil they cultivated in the bleak Solway flats. Although the Beckfoot farm was large and their sons went to good schools, they were not ambitious to be gentlefolk. The oldest son, by tradition, inherited the farm; the others were shopkeepers, auctioneers, and so forth in Northern market towns.

As a rule, they prospered, for they were industrious,

frugal, and shrewd. All that was theirs they firmly held, and the man who thought to cheat a Nicol paid for his rashness, but, for the most part, they were just, and for all their firmness, slow to dispute. Yet their utilitarian soberness hid a romantic vein and sometimes a touch of freakish humor. The Nicols, in fact, were Norse Englishmen.

Hugh was perhaps a good example and he carried the stamp of his Viking origin. His eyes were blue and calm, his short hair was stiff and colored like wheat stubble. His bones were large and his height was six feet, but he moved harmoniously, and on the Cumberland plain nobody thought him a large man. Since he had gone to a good school, his colloquial English was good, but sometimes he bantered a ploughman in Cumbrian, and when he tallied black-faced sheep he counted the scores by numerals the invading Danes had used.

Since his brother would get the farm, Hugh had taken five hundred pounds and emigrated. In Saskatchewan he joined a Border Scot on a prairie farm. Theirs was the type to prosper in the West, but when Sam Hughes called for men they sailed for France with a Canadian division. Herries stopped in France for good; Hugh went back, for the farm, by his partner's holograph will, was his. Although he might have gone higher, and had for a hectic twenty-four hours commanded a platoon, he was satisfied to wear a sergeant's stripes.

The Nicols were not shabbily ambitious. They certainly were not sentimentalists, but when Hugh got back to Saskatchewan the farm was lonely. Although Alec and he had sometimes disputed, he missed his comrade, and to see a hired stranger use the other's tools hurt. Then Alec had talked about the Peace River, where one could buy land cheap in the valleys of the North, and Hugh thought

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to push on was but to carry out his comrade's plan. He sold the farm, for a just price, and since the time was the late fall and nothing could be done before the soil thawed, he went home for a holiday. Moreover, he could use a larger sum than he had got, and in England he might find a partner with some capital. As a rule, Hugh's holidays were strenuous, and now he hunted widgeon on board his brother's punt.

Hoar frost sparkled on the deck, but the snowy ice was all about, and the punt floated up from the dark west towards the rising moon. Hugh heard the tide on the Shell sand, and when he got nearer saw stranded floes had frozen in the ooze. No birds were there; he must go on to the Scar. If the ducks had come up the firth, they might rest on the stones and search the pools behind the boulders. But he must cross the tide, and he seized the short paddles.

His stiff hands were in the water, which now and then splashed his wrists; his body was cramped behind the gun, but the canoe forged ahead, and the Scar began to get distinct. Large boulders topped the stony ridge which for a quarter of a mile rose a few feet above the tide. On the other side, frozen sands stretched back to the channel a Scottish river cut. The water sparkled and at the end of the point small dark objects dotted the stones and shining flood. He knew them for widgeon, and reckoned there might be a hundred in the flock.

Hugh waited. He would get but one shot, and the gun was not a swivel gun; in order to point it, he must turn the punt's bow towards the birds. One paddle was in the water; the trigger lanyard was in his other hand, and the tide carried him and a big ice floe smoothly along. At eighty yards, he might risk a shot, and when it was time to shoot he ought to see the birds' heads go up.

A few moments went. Hugh reckoned he was a hun-

dred yards off, and, moving the paddle, he watched the punt's bow swing. He held his breath, his hand poised for the backward sweep that would pull the trigger; but he did not pull. The flock broke and scattered as if a shell had burst. Dark objects cut the luminous sky. Some went off horizontally, trailing out near the water, to a wedge. Some went up and circled, and when they wheeled on slanted wings, their white undersides shone. Their backs were gray and indistinct, but one knew by their queer whistling flight which way they steered.

A curlew called on a high note, oyster-catchers screamed, and a black-backed gull swooped across the punt with a cry like a savage drunken laugh. Then the noise got faint, and soon all one heard was the shock of splintering ice and the gurgle of the tide. Hugh swore. The ducks were gone and he doubted if he would find another lot. They had not seen him; all they could see was a truss of straw and the punt's white bow, which was like a block of ice. Yet something had alarmed them. A blasted shore popper had put them up.

All the same, if a shore gunner was on the sand, his nerve was pretty good. He must have waded the swift Esk's channel, and a wider river ran between him and the marshes in Cumberland. Then, on a full-moon tide the highest boulders were, for an hour or two, under water. The thing was strange. In fact, if somebody lurked about the Scar, he was a reckless fool.

Hugh resolved to find out. Anyhow, he would stretch his cramped legs and try to warm his numbed feet. Pushing the punt through the ice, he jumped overboard and carried his four-pronged anchor up the bank. At the top he beat his arms across his chest and stopped. Stones rattled, and a man splashed in a pool. His figure cut the moonlight, and Hugh thought him a slenderly built young

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fellow. The queer thing was, he had no gun. Hugh went to meet him.

"D'you know the tide will soon cover the Scar?" he asked.

"I was afraid it might. If I put up the ducks, I must apologize," the other replied.

Stamping his feet, Hugh moved a yard or two until he got the moon behind him and the light was on the other's face. He saw the fellow was not as young as he had thought; anyhow, although his figure was boyish, his face was pinched and lined. Long fishing stockings went up under his motor-cyclist's coat, and a leather helmet covered his head. The stockings and the bottom of the coat were wet.

Hugh thought his look disturbed, but until the punt arrived he had some grounds to be alarmed, and Hugh imagined he had heard his voice before. One remembered voices, particularly voices that struck an emotional note, and he tried to fix a vague, baffling recollection. Had he not, somewhere in France, heard a young officer talk like that?

"You haven't a gun," he said. "What are you doing on the sands? But to begin with, I don't see how you got here."

"I waded a channel; Esk, I suppose. The tide was running fast and the bottom was soft. However, I got across, and by and by saw a much wider channel between the sand and the shore flats. It looked as if I was trapped, but after a few minutes the ducks got up and you beached your punt."

Hugh nodded. "Yes; the tide first reaches Eden channels and is now six or seven feet deep. Then soft-bottomed gutters curve about the muddy flats and the marsh-

top is some distance off. If you had run back to Esk, you might have got through where you crossed before."

The other hesitated and gave Hugh a searching glance. He saw a large young man whose yellow oilskin coat reached the top of his long boots. His figure was bulky and almost shapeless from the thickness of his clothes, but somehow he carried himself like a soldier.

"I was determined I wouldn't go back. I meant to reach the marshes in Cumberland, and if I'd arrived half-an-hour sooner, I'd have risked the plunge."

"Then, you'd have drowned," said Hugh. "Let's walk about. I've a notion my boots leak, and my feet begin to freeze."

He moved the punt's anchor, and stamping noisily across the stones resumed:

"Where you were going is not my business, but you cannot stop at the Scar, and if you like, I could land you on the Scottish side. My home is near the Border, although it's in England."

"No," said the other, firmly. "I durstn't risk it. I expect they would stop me at Carlisle, where one must cross Eden bridge. If I could get into West Cumberland——"

"*They?*" said Hugh. "Do you mean the police?"

"Not at all; but I might be stopped at Carlisle. The doctor would, no doubt, telegraph orders to watch the Dumfries trains. Then the only road is by Eden bridge, and his car is fast."

Hugh began to see a light. An asylum near Dumfries is famous, and it looked as if he were alone with a lunatic on the island sand. Well, he had fronted queerer adventurers in Canada and France, and he did not think the young fellow, so to speak, was dangerous. Besides, he did not talk as Hugh imagined a lunatic would talk.

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"I expect patients do not often get away from the Dumfries establishment. If you cheated the nurses——"

"It looks as if I had some lucid intervals?" the other suggested with a laugh. "I like your tact, and *establishment* is a useful word; but my anxious relatives did not think I was bad enough for the Creighton. My rest-cure home is select and exclusive; a small country house where a first-class alienist receives a few certified paying-guests. One doesn't call him a mad doctor; when you think about it, the term's invidious. However, I am not remarkably cracked, and I'm *not* going back to Scotland. I'd sooner the tide swept me off the Scar."

Hugh knitted his brows. He was rather annoyed than disturbed; to disturb a Border Cumbrian is hard. He supposed his duty was to persuade, or force, the young fellow on board his punt, and when they landed steer for a police station; but he was not going to do so.

For one thing, he was not long since a soldier and he had borne galling discipline and known authority misused. In fact, he had found out that freedom is worth almost as much as life. Then, for all his soberness, the Borderer, as a rule, inherits something of the qualities that marked his cattle-stealing ancestors. His sympathy is with the rebel and the fugitive. Moreover, in the meantime at all events, Hugh thought his companion sane.

"Well?" said the other, impatiently. "You said your home is in England, but you're as cautious as a Scot."

"A Cumbrian hates to be hustled," Hugh rejoined. "To begin with, where d'you want to go? If I am to help, you must, to some extent, give me your confidence."

"I thought about West Cumberland; I have friends at a place in the hills, and the doctor would, no doubt, reckon on my making for Liverpool, or London, by Carlisle. Nobody would expect me to take the sands, and if I got

across the marshes, I could stop for the night at a village inn. I am Frank Harden; I daresay my portrait will soon be in the newspapers, but before it's printed a day or two must go."

Hugh nodded. Harden's plan was as good as another, particularly since none but hand-net fishermen and a few wildfowlers crossed the treacherous sands. Although he was perhaps rash, the other's strained, nervous look moved his sympathy, and somehow he was satisfied he and Harden had met before.

"We must wait for the tide to get slack. I'll move the anchor, and then we'll walk to the end of the bank. Come on!"

Stamping their numbed feet on the frozen sand, they went off, and a herring gull turned on slanted wings and screamed.

II

THE FLOOD TIDE

HUGH threw down the ten-foot paddle, and the crash on the frosted deck echoed hollowly. When he dropped the anchor the punt went upstream and stopped with a jerk in the eddies near the edge of a bank. A thick white floe circled a yard or two off, and floated by. Then thin black stuff began to crackle at the bow and rubbed along the planks with a queer tinkling noise. Hugh pulled the straw from the bows and threw the bundle into the well.

"I have known a boat cut down in two or three tides by ice, but the punt's nose is sheathed with copper and we'll be off as soon as the bank is covered," he said. "You might get into the straw, and shove some across for me."

They lay down in the well, the big gun between them, and with the coaming ledge for shelter, were not unbearably cold. Hugh, fumbling under his oilskin, pulled out some cigarettes.

"Perhaps you would like a smoke?"

"I would, thanks," said Harden. "Since dinner I have moved pretty fast, and tobacco is rationed at the rest-cure home. All you may, and must not, do is marked in the book of rules. The doctor allows no bullying, but all the time you're watched and firmly steered. Although he's not a bad sort, I frankly hated him. Kind supervision gets intolerable, and liberty's worth fighting for, if you're but free to starve or drown. Well, I suppose I ran some risk when I tried to cross the sands?"

Hugh gave him a light. "You ought to have started an hour sooner, but I doubt if you'd have got across. The strange thing is, you were able to get away."

Harden laughed. His laugh was not altogether humorous, but the note of strain Hugh had sensed before was less marked.

"I trusted a herd who now and then brought the milk. One cannot always play for safety first; for example, I'm trusting you. If I thought you cheated, I'd capsize your punt. Anyhow, the fellow was a Galloway Marshall, and I expect none of his gipsy clan ever gave away a fugitive to a gamekeeper or the police. The motorcycle and fishing stockings were where he engaged——"

"He would expect some reward. Were you allowed to have money?"

"The sum was strictly limited, and when we lost at cards we paid by unstamped checks. The banker one evening collected five thousand pounds' worth of the documents. However, you have perhaps remarked that I'm not conspicuously cracked, and when I knew I was going to the home I made some plans. Doctors and nurses are not as clever as I believe they think. In consequence, I knew where to get a wad of treasury notes."

Hugh noted the other's bleak humor. Harden certainly did not argue like a lunatic. The queer thing was, he stated he knew he was going to the home; Hugh imagined the patients were not, as a rule, informed.

"You forgot to find out when the tide was full," he said.

"I was forced to wait for dinner," Harden rejoined. "We dine rather early in the evening, and are given knives with which I believe it would be impossible to cut your neighbor's throat, and soft-metal forks that could not be conveniently used for bayonets. Mine, at all events, dou-

bled up on a chop bone. On the whole, perhaps, the doctor had not much grounds to trust his guests——”

Harden stopped, and grinding his cigarette against the frosty deck, resumed with a touch of passion:

“If I’d hesitated, my dinner would have given me pluck. One talks about auto-suggestion! I had begun to think I might be mad. All the same, to smash the cigarette was a lunatic’s trick. Might I ask you for another?”

Hugh gave him another and he went on: “A rope helped me over an awkward wall, and the bicycle was at the spot fixed. A good little bus! The road is downhill to the Solway plain, and I reckon she never went as fast before. The ride for the sands in the biting frost was worth the thought and money the adventure cost. The Scots are supposititiously a cautious lot, but our lot are Borderers. However, you ought to know. You’re like us. I believe the police cannot stop your cockfights.”

“A cruel sport! The charm perhaps is, it’s not allowed,” said Hugh. “But you might go ahead.”

“For the most part, the road is straight. At one long village, the moon was behind the trees and a group came up the street. A dog ran across, and I thought my end and theirs would be spectacular. It’s strange perhaps, but, so far as I recollect, so long as I was not taken back, I did not mind. A Scot, however, can jump when he is forced, and the group exploded like a shell. The bus took the kidney pavement, between a shop window and a loaded barrow; forty m.p.h and the stones were round-end-up. I went up an oblique *vennel*, and back across a frozen kail-yard and some rubbish heaps to the road.”

Hugh looked up. Thin haze had begun to drift across the moon, and when he turned his head the other way he thought the sky got soft. The throb of the tide in the lower firth was louder. In the morning the wind might

veer west. Seizing the pole, he shoved back a threatening floe.

"Looks as if you had blazed your trail," he remarked.

"To *Carlisle*," said Harden. "Inquiries at the city will for some time keep the doctor occupied. To-morrow somebody will find the bicycle in a loaning near the sands; the herd, at all events, knows where she is. To calculate when I got there will not be hard, and I expect you can buy a tide-table at the Annan shops. Anyhow, the fishermen would fix the latest time at which one could cross the sands. Since it looks as if I arrived after the time was gone, the implication is pretty obvious."

"You cut the time very fine. When you found Esk channel deep, did you not think about the other river?"

"Oh, well, I believe I argued that if I could wade through Esk, I could wade Eden; but if I could not, I mustn't bother. One perhaps had better be drowned than mad. Well, I met you, and I think my luck begins to turn."

"We must shove off," said Hugh, and got on his feet. "I hope to find a back stream behind the middle sand."

He beat his arms and pulled up the anchor. Harden saw the sandbank had vanished and the current began to ripple across its top. Hugh, balancing on the narrow stern deck, swung a pole. His stroke was long and powerful and the punt forged ahead, the water lapping noisily against her bows. His figure cut the hazy moonlight; magnified by the curved deck's height and his thick clothes, he looked gigantic, but Harden noted his easy pose and the measured force he used. When his body swung one felt the punt leap forward, but although she went fast through the water, her advance over the ground was slow.

By and by Hugh threw down the pole, and hooking the anchor under a ledge, jumped overboard with the double

rope. Ploughing along ahead, he towed the punt and Harden saw the savage current break against his legs. Sometimes he stopped for a few moments and braced himself against the strain while ice drove by. The stiff white floes were noiseless; the thin black stuff undulated and crinkled with a tinkling noise. Harden seized the pole. Where the stream goes fast, to shove a punt on a straight course is awkward and he was not an expert, but they made some progress, and a low dark mass broke the mist that began to float about the Cumberland shore.

"Souter's Point!" said Hugh. "We can't reach it, but we ought soon to feel the eddy stream running into the bay."

He stopped. Glimmering ice floated up noiselessly but fast. Two floes collided and the scream of a lesser black-backed gull pierced the grinding, splintering crash. The broken ice revolved round Hugh, and Harden dropped the anchor and went overboard. The line was thin and a fresh large floe advanced.

"Drive your boots into the sand and hold on," said Hugh. "If the rope does not hold her, she won't stop until the stuff strands her three or four miles off up the firth."

Harden fastened his numbed hands on the frosty coaming ledge. The current splashed his knees, and the broken blocks, coming on in swift succession, beat his legs. A solid mass struck the punt's bow and split. He felt her tremble, and the vibrating deck echoed the thud. Then the divided floe bumped along her sides and jambed him against the planks. Harden swore, but he held on. He was not going up the firth; if it was possible for flesh and blood, he was going to shove the punt through the ice.

On the low hull's other side, Hugh gasped and strained. He was older than Harden by a year or two, but he was yet young, and protagonist is youth's instinctive part.

Neither, for the time, knew fear; they rather indulged a sort of primitive savageness. There is perhaps in Britain no stronger stock than that from which they sprang, and now they must fight the Solway tide they meant to win. Harden, at all events, dared not be conquered, and he drove his boots deeper into the sand that streamed back from his feet.

The large blocks went by, and thin black flakes like scum rippled brittlely against his canvas stockings. If there was much of it, the stuff would cut the material, and the water got deep. The tide was going faster; he felt the beat of the Irish Sea in the flood that leaped up-channel.

By and by the dark scum vanished and Harden got his breath. He began to think he might crawl on board, but Nicol waited, and in a few moments he saw another glimmering streak in front. So far as he could distinguish, the floe was ten or twelve yards across, and if it were solid, it must carry the punt away.

"Hold her up!" gasped Hugh. "I think it's the last. Hold on for your life!"

The ice crashed on the bow, and the churning, hammering pieces were round their legs. The floe was not solid, but the lumps, driven by the savage current, hit hard. They, however, soon sped by, and Hugh, pulling up the anchor, shortened the tow-line to three or four yards.

"We are near the edge of the sand and I'll walk her along," he said. "You might get on board, and shove."

He splashed ahead, the line across his shoulder, and for a few minutes Harden used the pole. Then he saw the current eddied and the tall figure in front suddenly got short; the water, which had rippled round Nicol's legs, was now at his waist. Harden, plunging down the pole, drove the punt ahead; Hugh's arm went across side-deck

and well, and his hand fastened on the ledge. Harden's pole sank deep and the punt tilted; he knew they were in the channel and Nicol's feet were off the ground, but his numbed hands could not get a proper hold on the other's smooth oilskin.

A shooting punt, built for two men, is fairly stable, but she can be capsized, and if one tries to get on board in deep water, one's legs go under the bottom. The safest plan is perhaps to lift one's chest over the pointed stern, but the deck was slippery with frost. Harden found bottom with his pole and held the punt against the stream; Hugh held on, and the current swung his legs against the side. Jerking one leg from the water, he hooked his boot behind a cleat.

"Lift cautiously, and I'll roll on board," he gasped.

Harden crouched on the opposite deck and reached across the well. He got hold of thick woolen stuff where the slippery oilskin stopped. The punt's list was ominous and it looked as if she might roll over, but the deck suddenly got level and Nicol was in the cockpit. Getting up, he pulled off his oilskin and jersey, and poured the water from his long boots.

"A fool's trick, but I have walked across the tail of a bank before," he said. "However, I don't think much water has got through to my skin, and my feet were once or twice as cold in France. If you will wring out my jersey, I'll take the paddle."

Balanced on the stern deck, his body followed the sweep of the ten-foot shaft. He had resumed his boots, but that was all, and it did not look as if he bothered about the frost. Harden had had neurotic pals whom he thought the plunge would have killed; in fact, not very long since he himself might not have survived the shock.

The Cumbrians and Border Scots, however, were a hardy lot. For example, some went punt-gunning amidst the ice, for sport! Sportsmen of another sort were satisfied to buy their thrills with money at a cockfight or a boxing-match.

In the meantime, the punt forged ahead. The dark point was now behind her; they had reached the eddy stream that circled back along the curving shore. Harden began to feel that he would soon be lonely. For some time others had thought and planned for him, and he felt Nicol might be a first-class pal. All the same, he had perhaps used the fellow as far as one was justified to use a stranger whom one could not reward.

"Could you not steer for the bank and land me?" he inquired.

"I might," said Hugh. "The drawback is, a marsh is a sort of delta. Creeks and *sows* and *runners* cross the flats, and when high-water's at midnight the stream runs *up* the channels. I want to dump you at a spot where you can get off the marsh."

He stopped his paddle and after a moment or two resumed:

"I've been thinking. The nearest inn is four miles off and I doubt if anybody ever stops there for the night. Then, a stranger might excite the landlord's curiosity. He'd wonder where you came from and where you were going."

"It might be awkward," Harden agreed.

"Very well. Two miles from the creek I'm steering for, a queer old fellow lives alone. He was at one time our cowman, but he now and then gaffed a salmon, without a license from the fishery board, and but for my father he might have gone to jail. If you told him I sent you, he'd

no doubt allow you to stop for the night, and he's not the sort to talk. In fact, I believe old Alan is discreet when he's drunk."

"I'll risk it. How do I get there?"

Ice shone in front and Hugh's paddle splashed. After a few moments he indicated a blurred, dark smear behind the misty shore flats.

"You keep the creek's left bank, and when you cross a road, steer for the wood. Near the wood, a plank spans the creek, and you take the path across an old peat moss. If Alan's not in bed, you will see his light, and anyhow you will soon see the cothouse. He's Alan *Reeah* o' Crike-side; you stress the long e, although it's written Wreay. In winter, a few ducks and geese feed on the marsh at night, and sometimes a shore-gunner from Carlisle prowls about. If there are any ducks in the neighborhood, Alan knows their haunts, and I dare say he'd lend you an old bottom-lever gun. In fact, if you wanted to lie up, Creek-side is the proper spot. Anybody who saw you would reckon you a city sport."

"By George," said Harden, "I like the plan! If I'm not spotted in a day or two, the doctor will conclude I'm drowned, and I do not imagine my relations will grieve much. I'll try it. I suppose I mustn't ask you to come along and present me?"

"I think not. If I push out soon for mid-channel, the tide will sweep me up the firth, but when the ebb begins to run I could not get across, and since the coast might be searched, I'd sooner the punt was moored at the usual spot. However, I might look you up to-morrow. If the frost breaks, we might perhaps get a snipe."

"You're a sportsman! I reckon on your visit," Harden replied.

Ten minutes afterward, he jumped for a bank of broken

turf, and watched Hugh shove off. His tall figure swung with the long paddle's rhythmic stroke, and on the narrow white deck hoar frost sparkled in the moon. The tide, however, was running fast and soon the measured splash got faint. Harden scrambled up the bank, and followed the creek through a belt of thin, low mist.

III

HARDEN LIES UP

HARDEN, stumbling through dead rushes, saw a telegraph pole, and a few moments afterwards plunged into a frozen ditch. When he crawled up the bank stones rattled under his boots and he knew he was on the road Nicol had talked about. That was something, because a tidal marsh is not the sort of spot for a stranger to cross at night. As soon as one had jumped a twisting creek one must look out for the next, and the mire of Harden's stockings indicated that sometimes one jumped short.

On the other side of the road he stopped and pulled out a cigarette; Nicol had given him a packet. Before he got a light, however, he opened a gate in a turf bank. If he heard steps, he could steal behind the turf; he must not risk the freedom he had rather dangerously won.

But for the humming telegraph wires and the tide's distant throb, all was quiet. Thin mist floated about the marsh and a long cloud got near the moon. The air felt softer; Nicol had thought the frost would break, and somehow his predictions carried weight. A useful man; one knew him competent, and Harden hoped he had not done with him.

Across the firth, under the vague Scottish hills, a small light twinkled and went out. A car on the Glasgow road? Three hours since, Harden had sped down the long, straight road as fast as he could shove the motorcycle along.

Thirty-five miles from the wooded valley in the moorlands from which spring Tweed and Clyde; and then a plunge through icy Esk. Something like a crowded evening; but he knew himself not much the worse for his exploit. Six months since, the strain would have knocked him out before he got to Lockerbie.

Harden admitted the rather drastic cure had worked. The doctor knew his job, but he ought to know when his patient no longer needed his help; in fact, he ought to know Harden was not, at the beginning, altogether mad. Yet he urbanely refused to fix the time when he would let him out. Well, the fee was large, and Harden's relations were not keen to restore him to freedom. Moreover, the fee was charged to his estate, and when one thought about it, to pay for being shut up was a particularly rotten joke. If he had knocked out the blackmailer who really drove him to the home, the Government would have met the bill, but the swine was a hefty fellow and Harden's speed and punch were gone.

He looked up. The cloud crept across the moon and the night got dark. Harden, musing for a moment or two about Nicol, pictured another night, in France; the night in which his youthful ambitions crashed.

The guns, at length, were quiet, and but for one devoted battery, ours were going back; Fritz was using caution, but one knew his battalions pushed on in the dark. Harden's battalion had melted to a couple of thinned-out companies. D Company was at the frozen canal, five hundred yards off, B, which was Harden's, in the sunk lane, and some Canadians were supposititiously on their left behind the wrecked wood. He was then a raw subaltern, but he thought his pluck as good as another's, and while they waited for the shock he quoted the Frenchman's boast.

Signals and most of the officers were some time since wiped out, and when it was obvious that Fritz had crossed the canal and his machine-guns enfiladed Company B, Harden was sent off to call back D, make touch with the Canadians, and then help the battery spot the machine-gunners——

That was not important. The picture he wanted began to get distinct; the moon piercing dark clouds, broken trees, shell holes, and a few Canadians, swearing tranquilly while they manhandled a trench mortar. The large young sergeant stated that some more were about; he was acting-Brigadier, and he promised the boys would remain. Another advised Harden not to worry. Since the gang was there, all was right.

Five minutes afterwards, a machine-gun bullet pierced Harden's shoulder-blade. He believed he did not for some moments stop, and then he plunged into a shell hole, where he went through some hollow ice and was held fast by the mud. By and by the tide of battle rolled across the spot and the shell hole had other occupants, one of whom lay like an incubus on Harden's perforated chest. At day-break, German stretcher-bearers pulled him from the freezing mud. He dared not think about the consequences, but sometimes he was sorry the fellows did not knock him on the head. What he wanted to think about was the Canadian sergeant—— But the cigarette was nearly gone, and he must look for Wreay's cottage.

He crossed two or three marish fields and a small peat bog by a fir wood. By and by he saw a faint, unsteady light like the reflection from a fire; and then a very small house with an iron roof. In the distance, across the bog, a railway signal-lamp shone. Harden felt that railway signals did not harmonize with exploits like his. When he started, on foot, across the sands, he, so to speak, went

back a hundred years. The flickering reflections beckoned and he beat on the cottage door.

"Whea's that?" somebody shouted, and by and by a man carrying a candle pulled back the door.

Harden saw a lined, brown-skinned face, a gray shirt, with a patch of different color, and long, thin legs. He rather awkwardly stated why he had knocked, and after pondering for a moment Wreay signed him to come in.

"If you're a friend o' Hughie's, you're welcome," he said. "You'll be after the ducks, likely? Weel, I got a bit sleep and you can tak' my bed."

Harden refused. He declared he would be satisfied with the couch in the corner, and if his host agreed, he might stop for a day or two, but he would, of course, be happy to pay for his lodgings. Nicol had stated that Wreay might lend him a gun; Carlisle was too far from the marshes, and so forth. For a moment or two the old fellow studied him shrewdly, and then gave him a queer dry smile.

"Just that! You're not the first from over t'watter to lie up at my bit cot. Crikeside's quiate, and if you're keen about it, you might shoot a black goose. If you're not, it's nowt t' do with me. Noo I'll give you a blanket and gan back to my bed."

By contrast with Harden's bed at the home, the blanket and old sheepskin rug were not remarkably clean, but he had used worse in France, and some other contrasts helped him to be content. A banked-up peat fire burned in the wide, black hearth, a short interior wall cut the draught from the door, and the little room was warm. Harden imagined the fire never went out, and when he had pulled off some part of his clothes and rolled the blanket round him he got onto the broken couch.

Since Nicol vouched for him, he believed he could trust

his host. He knew the old fellow's sort, for he himself was a Borderer, and the Scots and Cumbrians sprang from the same Teutonic stock. They were not emotional and they hated to exaggerate; they were seldom vulgar, and, for all their reserve, one sensed an instinctive courtesy. Their salient characteristic was perhaps stubborn independence, and when their rules and the magistrates' (or fiscal's) did not coincide they used the Border code. Since Charles and James Stewart tried by force to convert them the Scots were firmly Presbyterian; but had Knox used Laud's methods, Harden imagined the Borderers might have been as stanchly Catholic. It, however, had nothing to do with him. The important thing was, he reckoned his host could not be bribed or bullied to give him up. He turned on the broken couch, and in a few minutes was asleep.

At six o'clock in the morning Wreay got up and cooked breakfast. Harden gave him one or two treasury notes which he put into an old tea canister while the other was about. He perhaps implied that he trusted his guest, but Harden imagined his bank was at another spot. He stated that Harden, if he liked, might use his gun and cartridges, and then started for a job four miles away.

Harden examined the gun. If he stopped at Creekside, he might pretend to be a sportsman. The barrels were beautiful Damascus twist, but when one looked inside one saw where the powder had bitten into the welds. The old bottom-lever fastening closed slackly, and the cartridges shook about in the chambers. Harden saw they carried a Carlisle's ironmonger's stamp, and he hoped they were not loaded with modern nitro stuff. When the gun was made one used black diamond-grain. He imagined the old piece sometimes killed choicer game than Solway geese.

For some time he studied a large and greasy *Cumberland News*, and on the whole was bored; but he imagined the next weekly edition might interest him more. At noon Hugh arrived, by motor bus. He brought some sandwiches and a rather good hammerless gun, which he said was Jim's, and when they had lunched they followed the creek across the marsh and a very rough peat bog.

Although the bog had but begun to get soft the frost was gone and a faint west wind blew from the Irish Sea. Pale yellow light touched the calm, level clouds, and the wide sands and shore flats melted in the dim horizon. Only a train's smoke plume and a white farmstead in the background indicated that the marshland was not altogether desolate.

The quiet spaciousness fired Harden's blood. At length, he was his own man, free to go where he wanted and no longer forced to live by rule. Well, he had bought his freedom by money and strain, and he reckoned it might yet cost him something.

They shot a curlew and a very thin snipe. Hugh remarked that when the frost went, snipe in two or three days got fat, but since the birds were not numerous, they had better get off the moss, where he was not altogether entitled to shoot. Besides, when the light went some widgeon might fly across the sands.

At the edge of the bog a clump of battered firs and birches grew by the creek, and they sat down on a fallen trunk. Sometimes on a dim winter day the sky breaks at sunset; the clouds were rolling back, and twenty miles off, a mountain dominated the wide coast plain. The snowy peak was rather vague, ethereal blue than white, but a high, whaleback ridge shone with a soft yellow gleam.

"Skiddaw!" said Hugh. "The flattish block is Grass-

moor, and the little knob in the background is Red Pike. So far, the trippers have not much invaded the mountains' northern slope."

Harden studied the picture. The lines were getting blurred; the vague blues and sunset yellows began to melt.

"Do you know Alderswath?" he asked.

"It's on the long ridge that is just fading out. A lonely spot, and, so to speak, off the map. Two or three farms and a quaint, old-fashioned house; a manor house at one time, I believe."

"I have visited there," said Harden in a thoughtful voice. "Bob Latimer was my pal at school. When I went to the University, he went to a London stockbroker's office, but we kept in touch and after I got my small inheritance he advised me about investments and so forth. I had, of course, other advisers, but their plans were not my plans, and one can trust Bob—I'd like to consult with him now. The trouble is, in the meantime, I have no fixed address, and to look him up might be risky. In fact, I've thought about stealing across to Alderswath, where his mother and sister are—— But let's get back to the marsh."

A plank across the creek was wet and Hugh's boots carried clods of slimy mud. He went first, and when he was near the other end his foot slipped on the wood. Hugh lurched forward, and when he fell his chest was on the bank, but his legs and his brother's hammerless gun were in the creek. In a few moments he recovered the gun and emptied the water from the barrels. The bank was raised by peat cut from the channel, and he stood on top of the crumbling blocks, with the thin trees for a background, and swore. His swearing was rather mechanical than passionate, and the idiom was Western. Harden had heard somebody swear like that before behind a broken wood.

"By George," he said, "you are the Canadian sergeant I met one night in France! You and some others moved a trench gun."

Hugh laughed. "Why, that's so! An old Stokes'. We found her in the mud and none of us was a T.M. expert, but we lobbed Jerry one or two; dropped them in the brown just before he rolled us up. You are the rattled English *loot*?"

"I was rattled. We were two very thin companies, almost without officers, and we reckoned we fronted something like a brigade. A few minutes after I saw you I was hit. But we'll talk about it again. You ought to clean your gun as soon as possible."

"Sure," said Hugh. "For one thing, the gun is Jim's. I expect Alan has some oil and tow. Let's shove off."

They started for the cottage. The mountains had melted in thin haze, the light had begun to go, and the calling of wildfowl on the sands floated across the quiet marsh.

IV

A TALE BY THE FIRE

HUGH occupied a box by the fireplace and cleaned his brother's gun; Harden stretched his legs on the battered couch. The cottage was built of puddled clay, and a galvanized iron roof covered the perished thatch. Hugh reckoned it had stood for two hundred years and one might have mended the thatch, but milling wheat was no longer grown and oat straw was soft.

A block of oak, pulled from the bog, burned like a red coal, an ash block flamed, and one smelt aromatic peat, and bacon in the oven; the oven was in the chimney breast four feet from the ground. Dusk had fallen and a gentle west wind carried the tide's turmoil across the flats. Sometimes the noise was like a train, and sometimes like a distant waterfall, for three rivers and the salt lakes in the sands fed the shrinking channel. By and by Hugh put up the gun and gave Harden a cigarette.

"Since Alan has a job at Woolsteads, he will not be back for two hours," he said. "As a rule, in Cumberland you earn your pay, and four miles morning and evening is a pretty good walk, but our *old stannards* are a hardy lot. Well, until the bacon's cooked we will not bother about a light. I expect you *dined* later; but I must get my bus."

He stopped, as if he pondered, and Harden smiled. The Cumbrians, like the Scots; knew where to use reserve. All the same, he needed a pal, particularly a pal of Nicol's type, but before he asked the other's help he must give him his confidence.

"My meeting you in France was queer," he said. "Our next meeting, on the sands, was luckier, at all events, for me."

Hugh frowned. "My luck was not good the other time. I lost as fine a partner as I think any man ever had, although we carried him back to the casualty clearing station where he died. For some time we stopped Fritz. We might have stopped him all the time, but it looks as if your lot let us down. Anyhow, while we held the fort you pulled out."

"It looks as if *I* let you down," Harden replied. "The boys certainly did not. They were first-class stuff; Kitchen's men, all of them volunteers. In the morning we were a pretty strong battalion; at dusk two skeleton companies got back to the canal. But you were on our left all day and you ought to know if we could fight."

He slipped from the couch and went to the fireplace. Hugh had remarked that he moved lightly, with a sort of nervous speed and now he saw the blood come to his skin. As a rule, Hugh himself was rather slow; he pondered and did not allow emotion to carry him away. Seizing a charred stick, Harden drew three or four lines on the hearth stone.

"Your Canadians!" he said and moved the stick. "D Company by the canal, a short distance on our left front. Fritz, so far as we could spot him, rolling up as if he'd overlap. Our R.F. battery. Since they were quiet, we reckoned they didn't know where Fritz was. The moon was piercing the clouds and vanishing; sometimes little showers of snow."

"Yes," said Hugh, "it was much like that."

"Deering was captain, in command. His was the highest rank, we had lost the signalers, and he sent for me. If D Company were not yet cut off, they must drop back

in line with us. I must see where you were and then report the situation to the battery. I went, but I doubt if anybody but Deering saw me go. I found you, and three or four minutes afterward Fritz's machine-guns swept the ground. I was shot and fell into a shell hole, and that's all I myself know."

"Your company went. For a few minutes, we heard their rapid fire; and then all was quiet at the lane and Fritz was all over us. He threw us back, but I reckon it cost him much. You, yourself, were not accountable."

"Some people yet think I was accountable," Harden remarked. "But let me tell my tale. In the morning some Saxon stretcher-bearers pulled me out of the mud and broken ice. My wound went septic, I was three or four months in hospital, and when I did get on my feet, a few weeks at the prison camp sent me back. Food was short, the doctors were overworked, and so forth. But I mustn't bore you. When they sent me home after the Armistice, I was not the hefty young fellow you met at the wood."

Hugh gave him a sympathetic nod. "All, perhaps, carry some marks. When I knew Alec was dead, I wanted to go out with a machine-gun and a full belt, and I yet feel somebody ought to be shot. Not Jerry, so much; he, like us, but carried out his orders. The incompetent brass-hats who planned the attack; the fool who held back your supports until the bloody fight was lost. However, to storm will not help the boys we lost, and you were talking about B Company—the company that went."

"They were *ordered* to go. The men who gave me the news when I got home agreed about that. Fritz was swarming down the bank and had wiped out the men at the end of the hollow lane. An officer at the other end called off the rest, and somehow a number got away."

"Who called them off?"

"Ah," said Harden, "I believe two or three of the survivors are honestly persuaded I was the man. Others perhaps took it for granted and did not bother to inquire."

Hugh said nothing, but he stirred the fire and gave Harden a fresh cigarette and a light. Harden understood the gesture. For a few moments he brooded, and then resumed:

"Until the Armistice, I was in Germany, and Fritz's doctors had not made a first-class cure. Try to picture a high strung, physically slack neurotic. Since you want to know how I got into the home, I must talk about myself. Very well. I'm not altogether forced to work, but I was ambitious. My career was planned, but I felt entitled to a holiday, and I thought two or three months in town might help me brace up."

"A holiday in town broke a number of young fellows who escaped in France," Hugh remarked.

"I was broke, but did not know. The battalions brigaded with us were less cut up than ours, and at London clubs and social functions I met pals I'd made in rest camps and estaminets behind the line. The men I liked were cool; the others, for whom I had not much use, were familiar. You see, we were Kitchener's, and not the old-army, lot."

Hugh smiled. A number of his pals in France were frankly toughs, but for a rough-house at night in No Man's Land they were the proper stuff. He did not, however, think Harden a snob. The young fellow was fastidious, sensitive, and perhaps instinctively exclusive.

"At the beginning I was puzzled," Harden went on. "Then I forced a man I knew to enlighten me. He was apologetic, but he admitted an ugly rumor was going round; people thought me the man who ordered B Company to retire."

"But you were in the shell hole," said Hugh.

An ash block flamed in the red peat. Bright reflections leaped about the wall and touched Harden's face. The blood came to his skin, and the veins on his forehead swelled. Yet, perhaps because he was a Scot, he conquered his emotion. Hugh imagined a lunatic could not have used control like that.

"Ten minutes after I started, the only man who knew where I had gone was killed. There is no use in talking about the knock I got, but I meant to fight. I'd sooner vindicate myself, and somebody should pay for slandering me—— Perhaps you can picture the sort of stuff? However, I'm not entitled to bore you about my neurotic resolves."

"Go ahead," said Hugh soothingly. "You'll be better afterwards."

"The first move was to look up the Whitehall brass-hats and demand an inquiry. Well, I was sent from room to room and along miles of corridors. Do you know the blasted catacomb? They put dead men in catacombs, but some I interviewed were recently, and rankly, dug up. However, when I got up two or three floors I was firmly shunted. They knew nothing about the matter and were not interested. If I was not satisfied about my pension or gratuity, I must file the proper forms. I said I didn't want a pension! I wanted justice, and one old fellow remarked that I perhaps was lucky because the affair was *Stellenbosched*. Anyhow, they firmly showed me out and indicated that I must not come back. Stellenbosching was something they did in South Africa in prehistoric times."

"Stands for dumping," Hugh remarked. "Well, he fixed his date, but I reckon we had a commander who learned to fight at Cressy. The war lords wouldn't move? What about your friends?"

"My cousin, Mark Gardiner, was captain in the battalion. He is my senior by ten years and rather boasts about his political influence, but he was not at all sympathetic, and declared the proper line was to leave the thing alone. It was done with, and if I did not stand in the spotlight, people would soon forget. The drawback was, I could not forget."

"You refused to quit?" said Hugh.

"I stopped in town, and let myself go. It's possible I exaggerated, but I felt I was done with; and perhaps nobody who got back was remarkably sober in nineteen-nineteen. All the same, I made some inquiries and by and by found our physical-jerks and bayonet instructor at a new night club. Balham was dancing professionally; he's unscrupulous and cunning, but he can use his feet. Anyhow, he was in France with us, and I rashly sent for the swine.

"Balham remembered all that happened at the sunk lane; it looked as if he had made careful notes, and Mullins, a corporal in my platoon, was willing to bear him out. When Fritz broke into the lane, an officer of ours climbed the bank, and shouted the boys to cease fire and get back. The battalion was an English battalion, but the officer was a Scot. They knew by his voice; moreover, they knew the particular voice. The queer thing is, I rather think the brutes really imagined the voice was mine."

Hugh looked up. "On the Scar sand I knew you for a Dumfries Scot. You, with pretty good grounds, were highly strung. I expect a man, for example, swears in his native idiom. But was there another Scots officer in B Company?"

"My cousin, but his nerve is first-class. Mark's something of a bully, or at all events, a boss; he's the sort that in the new army went naturally to the top. He's got our silver cross and some French and Belgian tabs."

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"Like you, physically?"

"Mark is my height and you might note a likeness, but he's ten years older and strongly built. Your notion will not go. Mark is obviously not the man. At any time he'd sooner fight than run."

For a moment or two Hugh knitted his brows. He pictured a little battered town behind the line, and an English officer on the steps of a hotel where Hugh had an errand. The fellow wore a captain's stars, he was rather fat and his face was red, and he acknowledged Hugh's salute with the sort of scornful carelessness a good Canadian hates. Hugh thought he might be Harden's relation. Anyhow, his was the type that pushes to the top.

"I suppose Balham blackmailed you?" he said.

"At the beginning, he was modest. He and Mullins could use a small sum, but since the club was new, he hoped I would look him up and bring my pals. He got the sum, and now and then I went. My notion was to watch the brute; if my luck was good, I might see a way to control him. When I was dull and moody one evening, he gave me a white powder and told me to snuff up the stuff. I did so and my troubles vanished. In the morning I was going to storm the war office and force the brass-hats to exonerate me. So long as the thrill lasted, I was a conqueror."

"Cocaine?" said Hugh.

Harden nodded. "A d— insidious drug, particularly when you are feeling down and out. The reaction's strong; you want some more."

He stopped and brooded. Hugh noted that he shivered, as if he were cold. Then he quietly resumed:

"I got some more, and by and by Balham thought I could not go without. He, and I suspect the club's manager, had something to do with a dope combine. Mullins

was a billiard marker at the East End and somehow got the stuff from ships in the pool. My job was to attract fresh customers to the club."

"You, of course, refused?"

Harden laughed, a dreary laugh.

"Since I'd recently got my dose, I reflected that I had been an officer and was yet, to some extent, a gentleman. When the snow gets to work you are not afraid to be theatrical! Anyhow, my job was to punish the swine for his insolence. Perhaps you see the joke? A physical drill instructor, who, I believe, never himself used the dope. I was a lightly-built, war-shaken neurotic. All the same, I smashed some bottles and a large mirror; and then they put me discreetly but firmly in a cab."

"Did Balham let you go?"

"The drug did not. I went back and Balham was humorously apologetic, but since I would not join him, he wanted, and got, a hundred pounds. Well, I had yet some friends and was invited to second-class social functions. People began to think me queer, and my next exploit satisfied them that they did not exaggerate. The police watched the club, and one hectic evening somebody spotted a plain-clothes officer. Spies were not allowed, and fired by snow and champagne, I resolved I'd put the blighter in the street. The police, however, know their job, some more were about, and in the morning I and five or six young sportsmen who had gone to my help fronted the magistrate. If they had got Balham, I'd have been resigned, but the brute stole away, and my relations had had enough. Well, I think that's all and the bacon will be cooked."

Hugh went to the oven and pulled out the dish. His curiosity was not yet satisfied, but as a rule he knew

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where he must wait. They ate supper and by and by he said:

"I must go for my bus. We must watch the newspapers, and if I see something that might interest you, I will come across."

He went off and Harden brooded by the fire.

V.

HARDEN TAKES THE ROAD

THREE days after the shooting excursion, Hugh again arrived at Creekside, but besides his gun, he carried a Cumberland newspaper. Since Wreay mended the frost cracks in his cottage's clay wall with fresh lime-wash, Harden and Hugh took the marsh and stopped where the ground was firm behind the little wood. The afternoon was soft and cloudy, but for a time pale sunbeams touched the battered, slanted trees. Harden sat down on a white-skinned fallen birch and studied his rather indistinct portrait.

"I suppose they waited for the picture, but the London artist would not approve the newspaper's job," he said. "The important thing is, since I proudly put on my first uniform some time has gone."

Hugh agreed. In the smiling picture, Harden's skin was smooth, and one knew him boyishly hopeful. His was the type of athletic youth that joyously answered Kitchener's call for a hundred thousand men. Now his face was pinched and lined and his body was thin, but one yet sensed a vein of freakish humor.

"The editor was perhaps *instructed*, but when I study the letterpress I seem to know the Gardiner touch," he resumed. "He implies that I'm done with, and leaves you to conclude that in all the circumstances, it so to speak might be worse. The paragraph goes:

"It is feared that a fresh tragedy has happened on the dangerous Solway sands and the most recent victim is

Mr. Francis Harden, only son of the late Mr. Gordon Harden. Mr. Harden was severely wounded and captured during an engagement in France, and on his return from Germany suffered from the nervous strain rather vaguely termed shell-shock. After treatment at a Scottish medical institution, hopes for his recovery were entertained, but on the evening of—— he eluded his nurses and started for the Border on a motor bicycle. The bicycle was subsequently discovered in a lane near the Priory sands, and Mr. Harden's relations imagine he tried to cross the firth. The tide, however, was running up the river channels and there is ground to fear he was carried away. If he did get across, the strain may result in loss of memory, and news of his whereabouts would be thankfully received, and rewarded.'"

Harden threw down the journal and laughed.

"The pen is the newspaper man's, but the voice is Cousin Mark's. *Rewarded* is typical; the Gardiners are businesslike. If I'm drowned, he's resigned, but I mustn't be at large. After my exploits in France and town, my relations have had enough."

"Who are your relations?" Hugh inquired.

"My sister, Mrs. Cameron. I admit I'm not the sort of brother about whom a fashionable lady boasts. Aveling, my stepfather. He's a good sort, and little Anne, his daughter, is a sportsman. The real head of the combine is cousin Mark Gardiner—I hope you're interested, because if you are to be useful, you ought to know something about us, and it looks as if I needed a stanch pal."

"But is your mother dead?"

"She is a Gardiner," Harden replied in a queer, level voice. "My father was a Border laird and died long since; the trustees were forced to sell most of the estate and my

inheritance is small. My mother married Aveling, but he's not rich, and Mark has now our house at Thorshope. He's chairman of Kelvenden Land and Development, and has offices at London, Glasgow, and Winnipeg. I dare say he finds the house and shooting useful. Scotland is the city sportsman's favorite hunting ground."

Hugh lighted a cigarette. He noted the vein of bitterness in Harden's humor. Frank and his relations were obviously antagonistic, but a lunatic would not talk about them with his ironical calm.

"I do not see why they were *able* to send you to the home," he said.

"For one thing, I was willing. One does not narrate one's emotional experiences. Still, I suppose I was not altogether a fool, and when I saw where I went I wanted to stop. Snow, you see, is a devilish, insidious drug, and since I myself could not fight the stuff, I'd take an expert's help. Besides, when I was in the home Balham and his partner could not bother me; there is not much use in trying to blackmail a lunatic. Well, the doctor is an expert and it looks as if he had made a good job. Perhaps he was proud of his cure, for I could not persuade him to let me out, and Mark and Helen refused to ask for my release—— Now let's be practical."

"Then, you will soon need money."

"I am not going to borrow yours, and I have got five pounds."

"Five pounds will not carry you far."

Harden's eyes twinkled. "If I was in London, I could get some more. When I agreed to try the rest-cure I had lucid intervals, and I am a Scot. Anyhow, caution was indicated, and I sold out some investments and got Bob Latimer to bank the cash for me. In the circumstances, I

must as soon as possible start for Alderswath, and ask his mother to let him know I need supplies."

"He might take a lawyer's advice," said Hugh. "I don't know if the popular notion's accurate; if you can keep your freedom for fourteen days——"

"Something like that," said Harden. "You use tact. After fourteen days, I rather think your anxious relations must get fresh doctors to certify you are *cracked*, and since I am not more than half cracked, I might cheat the gang. In the meantime, I mustn't run a risk, and now my portrait's in the newspapers I'll get off the Solway shore. Alderswath is my first stop. Are you going with me?"

Hugh pondered. Although his brother was not jealous, Jim was working superintendent at Beckfoot farm; loafing began to be dreary, but Hugh need not return to Canada until spring advanced, and in the Northwest spring does not come soon. Then he liked Frank Harden, and the young fellow's pluck moved his sympathy.

"Your friends might not care to receive a guest they did not know," he said.

"Try it," said Harden, smiling. "In two or three days I can get news from Bob, and I admit I'll be happier if you are about."

"Very well," said Hugh, and pulled out his watch. "We will start in the morning, but I must first go home, and if I speed up, I might get a bus."

They splashed across some boggy fields and jumped a creek, but when they joined the road the motor bus was four hundred yards in front. Hugh tried to remember when the trains stopped at a station across the peat bog; Harden looked the other way and saw a small car advancing. By and by he stepped, with arms extended, into the road. The car stopped and the driver threw back the door.

"I'm sorry," said Harden. "You are not Mr. Donaldson?"

"I'm Wannop," rejoined the driver. "What do you want?"

"Oh, well," said Harden, "one A.B. car is much like another, particularly when it's black. My friend must be in Carlisle soon, but his bus is gone."

The driver said he was going to Carlisle and signed Hugh. Hugh hesitated. To some extent he was annoyed, but Harden pushed him on board and slammed the door. The car rolled ahead, and Hugh gave Wannop an apologetic glance. The other laughed.

"Your pal is prompt. He seizes his opportunity."

"Yes," said Hugh. "I rather think he does so. However, I was anxious to get home. Might I give you a cigarette?"

"And a light, please," said the other. "The road is greasy."

At nine o'clock in the morning, while thin mist yet floated about the shore flats, Hugh and Harden took the road to the hills. Harden carried Hugh's brother's hammerless gun; Hugh a game-bag, in which he had packed some clothes, and a rubber decoy pigeon. They looked like young sportsmen, and nothing indicated that one had recently escaped from a mental-defectives' home.

Hugh admitted he could not justify his part in the excursion. The adventure had a touch of comedy, but although it were tragic, he felt Harden would play up. Then the fellow paid for a fault that was not his, and, like many another, had lost much in France. Anyhow, for three or four months Hugh had no occupation and he was young. He had pushed off and he must go ahead.

The throb of the tide got faint and for two or three miles the quiet road went across a peat bog and flat, wet

fields. A gentle southeast breeze stirred the tasseled sedges in the six-foot ditch; the sky was dark and calm. Sometimes calling plover sprang up on noisy wings, shone for a few moments against the gray clouds and were gone. Sometimes vague mountains, veined by snow, pierced the haze and melted.

Then the ground began to rise and belts of fresh, chocolate-colored soil checkered the pale stubble. Gulls screamed behind a plough team and thin vapor floated about the straining horses. Sheep coughed in muddy turnip fields, and where men labored behind the nets one heard the revolving cutters clank.

Once or twice Hugh stopped, and leaning on a gate, talked to the sheep feeders. He hoped to get two-a-three cushats, he said; now the frost had gone, the birds would likely come down from the woods in the hills. The shepherds agreed, and one knew where a flock followed a row of yacks. Harden talked with authority about black-faced gimmers and foot-rot. When they again took the road, he laughed.

"If the police should make inquiries, I do not imagine these fellows will send them after us. They will probably argue that a man who knows sheep could not be a lunatic. A *yack* is perhaps a tree?"

"In Scotland, *aik*," said Hugh. "If you can properly use Y and W, in coals for example, you're a Cumbrian. However, I expect the men are satisfied we are *landward* folk."

They went uphill by lonely roads, and sometimes in the distance saw coal-pit smoke. At noon they stopped for lunch at a long, bleak village straggling by a trunk road across a foothill's top. A printed notice, with a portrait, was fastened to a board at the police station door, and Harden coolly studied the picture.

"On the whole, it's a better job than the newspaper made," he remarked. "To imagine I really did look like that is hard, but the great disillusion had but begun, and when you joined up you were perhaps an optimist. Well, we were very raw, and in a way, modest. We'd be satisfied to hang the Kaiser; now I imagine we might want to execute some more."

An officer in spotless uniform came down the steps and lifted a bicycle from the wall. Harden looked up calmly.

"The roads are soft, sergeant. I think the frost is gone."

"Nobody wants it back," said the other and got on his bicycle.

They went to a limewashed inn where a steep road runs down a hill. The stone-floored room was large and bleak, and when they had ordered food they carried chairs to a fire that leaped in a wide grate two or three feet from the ground. Three or four muscular fellows whose pallid skin was grimed by coal-dust occupied the end of a long deal table, and presently one looked up from a stained newspaper.

"They haven't found him yet, and they likely won't," he said. "Spring tide runs up firth as fast as a horse can trot."

"Some folk is lucky; he might have got across," another remarked. "Suppose thoo thowt thoo spotted him?"

"I'd say nowt," the first replied. "An asylum's likely worse than pit, and I was at p'litical meeting last neet. Candidate's London friends was talking about cwoal. I thowt there was wiser folk in asylum than some that's yet outside."

He drained his glass and when the group went off Hugh seized his game-bag.

44 THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH

"Your nerve is pretty good, but it looks as if we ought to take the road."

Harden laughed. "I am going to smoke a cigarette. It rather looks as if cousin Mark planned better than he knew. He indicates that he believes me dead, but if, by some chance, I am not dead, I'm mad. He cleverly drew a portrait with which I do not harmonize. In consequence, unless I'm conspicuously eccentric——"

"Yes, of course," said Hugh. "I don't see his object. Am I allowed to inquire?"

Harden crossed the floor, and some time after he rang a bell, a largely built red-faced girl appeared behind the wooden bars that, carried up to the ceiling, inclosed a corner of the room.

"In Cumberland, you do not trust strangers much," he said. "Is the fence for your protection? Or, perhaps, for the beer's?"

The girl laughed and gave him two long glasses, which he carried back and put down with a steady hand.

"You inquired about my cousin, and I do not suppose he covets my diminished fortune. If he got the lot, he would not be rich. Then Mark is, conventionally, honest. He might sell his friend shares he knew would soon go down, but he'd use the rules they use on the stock exchange. No! Now he has got our house and his business prospers, I rather think he has social ambitions; he'd like to be a Scottish laird, and he might be a member of Parliament. Then, you see, my sister is fashionable and her husband is Mark's supporter. In the circumstances, they would sooner not risk the notoriety I might throw on them."

"After all, if your cousin had given B Company the order to retire——"

"He did not," said Harden, frowning. "I told you something like that before. As you have perhaps surmised, I have not much use for Mark, but one must be just, and he's the sort of thick-necked, red-faced bully whose pluck is really good. In fact, I reckon the Jerries who threw him out of the sunk lane got some nasty knocks."

"The thing is baffling," Hugh remarked.

"That is so. It's the sort of incident on which the brass-hats discreetly put the lid," Harden agreed, and clenched his fist. "You mustn't admit an officer stole out of the fight, and anyhow, when headquarters knew, I was off for Germany. Well, I was not the culprit, but by George, I have paid for my bad luck!"

He pushed back his glass and laughed; Hugh had noted that his moods swiftly changed.

"You cannot be properly theatrical on post-war beer. There's another thing; not long before I went to the rest home, Bob Latimer banked my money, which was possible because my relations imagined I had squandered the lot. I, however, executed a deed giving Mark control of one or two investments and a piece of land that could not, at the moment, be sold for a satisfactory price. Their value is not large, but the sum might be useful, and I'd sooner it was in Bob's hands than Mark's."

"Could your friend not get a lawyer to apply for and cancel the document?"

"If I talked like that, nobody might think it strange," Harden rejoined. "In the meantime, I'm supposititiously dead, and a lawyer cannot be instructed by a corpse. Looks as if I might be forced to steal the deed. You see, I know the house; I might, in fact, allow you to help."

"I think not," Hugh said firmly. "If you are going to be a fool, I will start for home."

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"Oh, well," said Harden, "we will talk about it again. Suppose we push off. You do not get much thrill from Control-Board liquor."

They went down a steep hill and crossed a slow river that coal-pit dumps had stained. Then the road began to climb to the vague, high moors. The afternoon was getting dark and the wind was colder.

VI

ALDERSWATH

AT the top of the last hill Harden stopped for breath and leaned against a gate in a rough dry-wall. The gateway fronted west and at the bottom of the long slope it commanded, a dim plain rolled back to the melting level one knew was the Irish Sea. At one spot, a pale red streak marked the horizon; at another the reflection from a blast furnace flickered in the sky. All the rest was gray and indistinct. Hugh turned his head and saw dark, folding moors, and then a faint, white peak, thrust up above a mountain's long flat top. The wind had dropped, and on the hill one sensed the spacious, evening calm.

"The country's bleak," he said. "The snow lies long in Skiddaw Forest and almost forever a savage wind blows up from the firth, but the roses of Alderswath are famous. I believe they are as fine as any in Cumberland."

"Your statement's modest," Harden remarked. "The roses of the North perhaps draw sweetness and color from the wind and frost. Anyhow their charm's peculiar and exclusive. When one is slightly cracked, one's entitled to be romantic, but I expect you'll soon admit I'm not extravagant. But come on. When I meet my hosts I want your support."

For ten minutes they went downhill. In the hollow at the bottom, a beck splashed noisily across the road, and a plank bridge for foot passengers went along a wall. On the other side, the stream curved about a green flat where

noble sycamores grew and old white farmhouses and barns with stone-flagged roofs stood back from the road. Farther on, a wooded ghyll pierced the dark hillside.

By and by Harden pushed back a gate. A flagged path went up between sloping grassplots to a low terrace wall. Behind the wall, Hugh saw an old gray-stone house. Its straight front was broken only by the molding above the mullioned windows and the carved lintel at the door. The house was small, but in spite of its lack of ornament, not austere. Hugh felt it carried a quiet English charm.

Harden, using his proper name, asked for Mrs. Latimer, and for a few moments a maid servant left them in a wide hall where the dark, polished floor reflected an oil lamp's yellow beam. Hugh had thought to hear an exclamation of surprise, or perhaps swift steps, but only indistinct voices reached him from behind the half-opened door. Then the girl signed them to advance, and they went down two steps into a low room.

For three or four feet from the dully shining boards the room was paneled; above the brown wood, the wall was soft green, and Hugh saw a picture of crimson roses. Triangular cupboards occupied two corners; for the most part the floor was not covered, and the small, solid table was oak. The light was not remarkably good, and elusive reflections touched the smooth wood. Hugh was not an antiquarian, but he knew some old Cumberland houses and imagined all he saw had been there for two hundred years.

He felt the two ladies and their background harmonized. Their clothes were modern and to some extent fashionable, but he thought their carriage and quietness were not. One had got up from an easy-chair and Hugh remarked her thinness and her white hair. Yet her skin was marked by a soft pink bloom, and although she had

perhaps some grounds to be startled, her pose was calm and queerly dignified.

The other was young and he noted her tall figure's flowing lines. Emotion might have heightened her color, but he imagined the Solway wind accounted for its clear rose-red. Her eyes, like her mother's were calm and gray; her hair was yellow. One knew her English, and somehow sensed balance and proud control. Well, Harden had talked about the roses of the North!

Mrs. Latimer gave Harden her hand. When he took it he bent his head, but his gesture was rather respectfully humorous than theatrical. Hugh waited, firmly posed and quiet, and looked straight in front; Harden afterwards remarked that one expected to hear his hands slap and his boots click when he moved. Miss Latimer also waited, her glance searching Harden's face.

"We thought you dead, Frank," said Mrs. Latimer, in a slightly unsteady voice.

"I believe Helen and Mark yet think me done with, and in the meantime I'd sooner not disillusion them," Harden replied. "However, I hope you and Constance did not get a shock, or perhaps a knock, a few moments since."

"I do not think mother likes your joke," Miss Latimer remarked.

"Oh, well," said Harden, "when you mustn't be emotional, to be humorous is sometimes a relief. Then, you see, Scottish humor is rather grim—— But might I present my pal? If he had not come to my help, I might be really dead."

Hugh was presented. He thought Mrs. Latimer's glance was kind and Miss Latimer's interested. He liked their cultivated voices and the implication that since he was Harden's friend they took him for theirs. By and by Harden inquired:

50 THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH

"Did Mark telegraph you?"

"Two days since," said Mrs. Latimer. "Constance replied that you were not with us."

"So far, so good! Mark did not expect I was here; he, no doubt, felt he must follow all the clues he had. I don't know if he strongly hoped they'd lead him somewhere. Now he's satisfied, he will not bother you again, and Hugh and I might risk stopping for three or four days."

"Of course, Frank," said Mrs. Latimer.

"We reckoned on your kindness," Harden resumed. "I admit I'm selfish, and you might be made an accessory, or something like that, after the event; but, for all her scrupulousness, I believe Constance, if she were forced, could baffle cousin Mark."

Constance Latimer gave him a swift, rather anxious glance. Harden smiled.

"Since you are not afraid of Mark, you are perhaps disturbed about me? Well, I begin to think the doctor made a first-class cure. He certainly refused to let me out, but if you had known my recent companions, you'd admit that their society might have an insidious effect on him. There perhaps is the explanation. But let's be sober. As soon as possible I must get in touch with Bob. I want some money, and I might want him to consult a lawyer, but I have no postal address and your letter might cover mine. Then since I started to plan my break for freedom I have borne some strain, and Alderswath is a restful spot."

"You must stop until you know it is safe for you to leave us," said Mrs. Latimer in a gentle voice, and turned to Hugh. "We are old-fashioned, Mr. Nicol, and in the Cumberland hills supper is served at seven o'clock. In the meantime, I will send for some tea."

"I expect he'll wait," said Harden. "But you might give me the news. I hope Bob is prosperous."

Mrs. Latimer said Bob was well and satisfied. In the open weather, she and Constance had sometimes gone to see the farmers' foxhounds start. They were twice at concerts at Cockermouth, but could only go when somebody drove them there. The otter hounds had a new master and would by and by hunt the ghyll. The vicar wanted to build a village hall, and in order to get part of the money, Constance was drilling a children's Pierrot troupe. In summer they might have a garden-party bazaar; and then, of course, there was the flower show.

A day on the road had not tired Hugh, but he was content to sit by the fire in the charming old-fashioned room. Mrs. Latimer's voice was gently soothing; had he not studied her, he might have thought her remarks ironical, but it looked as if she were satisfied with the tranquil life she pictured. He did not know about Miss Latimer; for all her calm, one sensed nervous force. Nothing, however, indicated that she rebelled.

"I suppose you are, as usual, going to town in the spring?" said Harden.

Mrs. Latimer agreed, and said they had already begun to talk about their holiday. Then she turned to Hugh and smiled.

"The annual excursion is our only adventure. My son is at a London stockbroker's office and hopes for a partnership."

"Bob will get the partnership," Harden remarked. "I don't know if his stanch honesty is an advantage on the stock exchange, but he has other qualities that will carry him ahead, and since he's a Cumbrian he'll hold all that's his."

"We hope he will do so," Constance rejoined. "I believe to cheat a Scot is hard."

"Some people think it impossible. I myself have not tried; so far, my part has been the trustful victim. However, if you can rob a Cumbrian, you perhaps deserve some reward, and if you experiment in Yorkshire—— But comparison is invidious, and sometimes I talk at large."

"After all, the strong silent man is out of date," Constance remarked. "But you have not yet talked about your exploit. I rather think you ought."

"In a way, perhaps, that is so," Harden agreed. "Very well."

Hugh had not heard all the tale before, and although Harden to some extent was humorous, he saw it moved the others. Frank obviously had qualities. He knew whom to trust, where his bribe must be large, and when to wait. His plans were sound, and where he must take action he moved resolutely and fast. Yet, when it looked as if he had won, he risked all by his rashness on the sands. Hugh thought Constance noted it; she, no doubt, knew Frank Harden.

"But why did you run the daunting risk?" Mrs. Latimer inquired. "If you had but waited, the doctor must soon have acknowledged that you were cured?"

"I wonder!" said Harden quietly, and then his eyes twinkled. "In the meantime, he would not let me go, and the Scots are *thrown*. If he had tried to push me out, I'd probably have stopped."

Constance's glance for a moment rested thoughtfully on Hugh.

"When Frank met you on the sands he was lucky; I do not know if it was really strange, although you saw him last in France. Things do happen like that; and then your father's farm was not far off."

"You are *statesmen*; the farm is yours?" said Mrs. Latimer. "There is another at Alderswath, and since the war one or two of our neighbors have bought the land they use; but I am sorry the old stock, for the most part, is gone."

"Hugh's a yeoman; you ought to know the type," Harden remarked. "I expect his ancestors drew the long bow at Flodden. The cloth-yard shaft is out of date, but a high-explosive bomb is useful if you drop it neatly where your antagonists congregate, and when I met Hugh in France, he was watching for Fritz behind a Stokes gun. I imagine his lot stole her from an English battalion. When you think about it, we have not got much more civilized in four hundred years."

For a moment or two he was quiet. His smile vanished, and his look was hard when he resumed:

"I forgot I have not much grounds to boast about my part that night. Well, some day I hope to solve the puzzle."

"You mustn't brood about it," said Mrs. Latimer soothingly.

Hugh noted Constance's glance. She, no doubt, knew Harden's changing moods, but it looked as if she sympathized. Hugh himself altogether sympathized. He pictured his shattered comrade and the lurching stretcher. Although Fritz pushed them hard, they had sent their wounded back. He and the other had sweated and frozen in Canada and France, and he was lonely when Alec went. Yet he did not curse the Saxons much, and the English lads on the broken battalion's right were stanch. A weak-nerved swine had sold the pass, and Hugh, like Frank Harden, hoped to find the man. In the meantime, they must talk about something else.

"You have not yet got a car?" Harden remarked.

"We will probably continue to go without," said

Constance with a smile. "Mother is firmly persuaded that for her to drive a car would not be *right*. I really think she does not exaggerate."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Latimer, "I believe I could yet ride a young horse, and not very long since I could climb an awkward ghyll, but I would not like to feel the people I drove off the road hated me."

"Nobody could hate you, ma'am," Harden declared.

"If I marked my track across the country by frightened children, scattered sheep, and slaughtered fowls, I should deserve to be hated. Then, unless you are something of a mechanic, I imagine a car is expensive."

"And Bob must get his chance? When one thinks about it, he is lucky, but I believe he knows, and Bob's habit is to pay his debts."

Mrs. Latimer turned to Hugh.

"For a young man to find an occupation in our quiet dales is hard. He must go south, to the large cities——"

"Mr. Nicol went to Canada," Constance remarked with a smile. "It looks as if our barren hills are a sort of nursery for the gentlemen adventurers, and each family had its favorite hunting-ground. Frank's relations, like you, chose Canada; but my brother is the first of us to make his plunge on the stock exchange."

"The world is the Scots' inheritance," said Harden. "I got to Germany, but if I can cheat the doctors, I might go farther. The queer thing is, even in the Dominions, nobody seems to welcome us. However, since I'm not predatory, they might let me in."

"You are not an accumulator," Constance agreed.

"We had hoped my son would go to India; but he was four years in France, and he doubted if he could satisfy the Civil Service examiners," said Mrs. Harden.

Hugh thought four years in France enough to banish

any ambition to be a soldier that the young fellow might have had. Then talents examiners rejected might yet prove useful on the exchange, and if one's luck were good, the reward was larger. Nothing in Mrs. Latimer's voice and look indicated that her son's choice had jarred, and she obviously meant to see him out. Yet Hugh had remarked a beautiful ivory model of domes and minarets, the Taj Mahal he thought, and the decorated arch in the water-color drawing was no doubt, a Moghul fortress gate. From his hosts' point of view, to sell stocks and shares was perhaps not altogether a Sahib's job.

Hugh, however, was willing for them and Frank to talk. It looked as if Constance studied Frank, and Hugh wondered whether he was her lover. Her interest, in a way, was protective; sometimes he thought her puzzled and almost disturbed. Well, Harden was a baffling study. His impulses were freakish. Sometimes one did not know if he joked, and when he was sober one noted a mocking vein. All the same, his charm was marked. Ten minutes after they met on Solway sands Hugh began to like the fellow.

"I think I'll start for Canada," Harden said by and by. "One ought perhaps to have an occupation, and Hugh's business will be to find me a useful job. My talents are not numerous, but on the whole I'm willing to work. In fact, if Mark sticks to my money, I might be forced."

Hugh unconsciously knitted his brows. He liked Frank, but to be accountable for him in Canada was another thing. Then he saw Constance smile, as if she had noted that he pondered.

"Since you might see another plan, we will talk about it again," he said. "Anyhow, you must not be rash. If you take a job in the Northwest, you will not get much chance to loaf."

A clock chimed and Constance got up. Supper was served, and for some time afterwards the group engaged in quiet talk. Hugh frankly liked his hosts. Their cultivation was higher than his and he knew them fastidious, but, perhaps for Harden's sake, they were kind. There was, however, no use in speculating about it. In a day or two he would be gone.

When he went to bed he carried a candle in an old brass candlestick to his low-roofed room. He smelt orris-root and roses, and found the faint scent came from a Chinese jar on a dark corner cupboard. A mouse gnawed the worm-eaten boards, and sometimes the floor cracked. The beck brawled in the ghyll, but the noise got faint, and Hugh was asleep.

VII

SOUTHWAITE FELL

HUGH was persuaded to stop at Alderswath longer than he had thought. Until they got news from Robert Latimer, Harden's plans must wait, and Hugh imagined his hosts would sooner he was about when the letter arrived. Indeed, Constance discreetly indicated something like that, and it began to look as if he had, to some extent, made himself accountable for Frank. Hugh, however, was willing to stop. He might not again enjoy the society of a girl like Constance Latimer, and in the meantime, he might do so without much risk. Although she was friendly, Miss Latimer knew he was not her sort.

He did not yet know whether Harden was her lover. Frank's drawbacks were rather obvious, and when he talked about emigrating Hugh had not thought Constance disturbed. She was Harden's champion, but that might be because he was her brother's friend. All the same, if she had loved Frank before he, so to speak, had crashed, she would stick to him. Constance Latimer was stanch, she could not be shabby, and she was not the sort to be afraid.

Harden one morning suggested an excursion to the hills, and they took a shepherd's path up the ghyll. Hoar frost sparkled in the dead fern, and where the path followed the beck, spray had frozen on the stones. After a time the ravine got precipitous, and at a spot where the track went up the bank Harden stopped.

"Do we climb out?" he asked.

"If you like," Constance replied. "The bog at the top is soft and the frost was light. Then the ghyll is not really awkward."

"Shove straight on," said Harden. "After all, I ought to go where a girl can go. Something, of course, depends on the girl; but we'll try it."

They went on. The stream plunged across mossy ledges and the pitch got steeper, but small trees grew in the rocky bank and the frost had not penetrated the narrowing chasm. Hugh noted that Miss Latimer did not hesitate and moved harmoniously; where she crossed a treacherous shelf her balance was better than his. He had thought a girl might be awkward, clumsy perhaps, but she went fast, and found, as if by instinct, the surest holds, although he saw she rather used her feet than her hands.

Hugh used both, and sometimes was not satisfied with their support. He had studied Constance in the paneled room, with which she harmonized, and had thought she stood for fastidious, but perhaps old-fashioned, cultivation. Yet she was at home on the rocks, and she stepped as serenely from jambed stone to mossy ledge as she had moved across the polished floor.

At the top of a smooth, steep slab she waited for Hugh. Harden was in front, and a stone he dislodged crashed against the rocks and plunged into a pool. The pool, dammed by a ledge, was a yard or two under Hugh's feet, and his boot was in a crack. On one side, a small mountain ash leaned out from the rocks.

Constance, anchored by her knees, stretched out her hand. Hugh frowned, unconsciously, and swung for the mountain ash. The thin trunk bent, and he thought he heard roots crack. In a moment or two he would be in the pool, and he might not stop there. Then his other boot

found a knob, and gasping and red-faced, he was on the ledge. Constance gave him a smile.

"Did you imagine I would let you down?"

"Not at all. I thought I might pull you down. That, of course, is another thing."

"I wonder!" said Constance. "You meant to be nice, but I don't know if I am flattered. You see, I knew my anchorage was firm. If a man had given you his hand——"

"Oh, well, independence is sometimes a drawback. If you like, I'll admit I'm old-fashioned."

"It's obvious," Constance rejoined. "Some old rules were useful; at all events, they were graceful."

Stones rattled and a muddy wave rolled down the channel. Constance looked up and laughed.

"Frank's step is not light. Come on! I expect we will be safer if we get in front."

They reached the top, and for some time ploughed across stones and heather. The frost melted and the sparkling drops dried in the sun. In front, but two or three miles off across the rising moor, thin mist dimmed a deep rift that curved back into the hills. On one side, a road followed the stony channel of a beck down a shallow valley, and when the group stopped by a small, terraced limestone crag Harden looked about. A man on a bicycle sped down the valley road.

"The bicycle's red," he remarked. "If that's your postman, he might have Bob's letter."

He plunged down the hill, and Constance sat down in the stones where the sun, reflected by the rock, was warm. Harden, a hundred feet below them, leaped across the hummocked peat, but at a smooth, bright-green spot he stopped and it looked as if his legs were cut off at his

knees. Hugh thought he swore, and when he again plunged ahead Constance laughed.

"A well-hole! Frank ought to know bright moss is treacherous, but he does not always ponder where he goes."

"Just now, for him to ponder might be useful," Hugh remarked. "To some extent, he has given me his confidence, but I don't yet know all he is up against. For example, his relations. However, I must go cautiously. They are perhaps your friends."

"To begin with, I think you ought to fix how far you are willing to go."

Hugh knitted his brows. She thought his habit was not to move rashly but when he saw his line he would not stop for obstacles.

"Let's be frank," he said. "When I found Harden on the sands, all I reckoned to do was to land him safely. Then I heard his tale, and it began to look as if, for a day or two anyhow, I must see him out. I suppose his being willing to tell me the tale had something to do with it."

Constance nodded. Had she been in Frank's place, she would have risked as much.

"Yes. Since he trusted you, you could not let him down? You had got entangled before you knew!"

"Oh, well, we found we had met in France, the night Jerry smashed the English battalion and got round our flank—— But you knew about it?"

"I know Frank was not accountable," Constance rejoined and gave Hugh a proud, level glance. "I hope you are satisfied."

"If I had doubted, I might have left him on the sands," said Hugh in a queer, stern voice. "For a minute or two I am going to bore you."

He told her about his partner and the comrades he had

lost, and, carried away by regretful thought, pictured the Canadian's democratic scorn for the harsh authority some English officers used.

"My lot were farmers from Saskatchewan," he said. "We went, of course, where we were told; into the thick of the hardest fights that were fought in France, but our officers sweated, swore, and joked with us. They were not omnipotent bosses and they used us like men. Well, I daresay I was ridiculous, but I felt that a fellow I saw at a hotel behind the line stood for all we hated in the other sort. A thick-necked, red-faced, bully, who would not move himself to let a Canadian soldier go up the steps."

"You were perhaps the soldier?" Constance remarked.

Hugh laughed. "Sorry, Miss Latimer! I ought not to have got mad. Your calm is soothing, but sometimes I dare say it's hard. However, all that's important is, the fellow was an officer of the battalion that left us to hold the fort, and one feels that a bully ought, at all events, to fight. Somebody refused, and because his nerve broke, my partner and my pals went West. You asked how far I meant to go. If Frank Harden can help me find the man, I'm going all the way!"

"Then, we are friends," said Constance in a quiet voice. "But you inquired about Frank's relations. His father was a Border laird; the Hardens were rather important; but he is long since dead. Mrs. Harden soon remarried; I believe her main object is to be fashionable, and she did not bother much about Frank. Aveling, her rather colorless second husband, indulges her, but does nothing to help her ambitions. Sometimes I think he has qualities he is not allowed to use. His daughter now and then visits with us. She is a charming girl."

"Frank's *little Anne*? He told me something about her."

"Anne is not large," said Constance, smiling. "For all

that, you feel she's *vital*—do you not talk about a live wire? Then she is Frank's stanch champion. I think I love her."

Hugh reflected that he was Harden's champion, and he imagined Miss Latimer saw where her argument might lead. Well, Frank was her sort, and she knew he was not, but he was willing to be her servant and help where his help was useful.

"Frank has another sister," he said.

"Helen, too, has social ambitions, and since she married a rich husband she has made some progress. Mrs. Aveling was a Gardiner and the Gardiners are not remarkable for modesty," Constance replied. "I expect Frank has told you about Mark. He aspires to be a member of Parliament, and will probably get there. These are not the people to stick to a relation for whom they must apologize, although if he had come back from France a conqueror, they would have boasted about him. I do not think they much care if Frank ran away or not. He is, at all events, suspected and socially done with."

She stopped, and looked straight in front. Her pose was braced and Hugh saw her look was scornful. Constance Latimer was thoroughbred; he imagined she came near to hating Harden's shabby relations. Hugh believed he knew their sort. It swaggered and swanked, behind the line, in France, and somehow got the cushy jobs. Then Constance climbed to a ledge and signaled. Her figure cut the sky and Hugh thought her pose and flowing lines unconsciously statuesque.

"Frank has stopped the postman. I think the man knows me and gives him the letter," she said.

The postman got on his bicycle, and ten minutes afterwards Harden joined the others and sat down in the stones.

"The letter is yours," he said. "I hope it covers one for me."

Constance tore the large envelope. "Yes, here it is. But the packet is registered, and the man must ask for a receipt. Do you think your giving him your name was safe?"

"I wrote yours," said Harden with a smile. "The letter was yours and he saw you signal; in consequence, if he looked at the ticket, all was right. But I expect nobody looks at the tickets. They stick them on a file, and by and by bury them forever in the post-office caves. The British Government hates to destroy any sort of document."

Constance smiled as if she indulged him, and Harden pulled out a bundle of treasury notes, on which he put a stone. Then he glanced at two typewritten sheets and pushed them into his pocket.

"You can reckon on old Bob's playing up," he said. "I begin to feel like a winner; but let's shove off."

"Are you not going to read his letter?"

"The letter," said Harden, "will not go bad. Bob likes to make a thorough job and he has tried to copy the lawyer's talk. I, however, am out for a holiday and when we started our object was to climb Southwaite fell."

They pushed on across the moor, and after a time followed a curving sheep path to a hill's flat top. A few yards from the cairn by which they stopped, the ground dropped sharply to a wide semi-circular gulf where storms had torn black gullies in the peat. At the bottom, the moor and rolling plain swept back to the dim Irish Sea. When one looked the other way, snow-veined mountains sometimes pierced the soft clouds and vanished. The afternoon was getting dark, but pale sunshine yet touched the cairn and they ate their sandwiches behind the stones. By and by Harden lighted a cigarette and pulled out his letter.

"I'll translate; the remarks are a lawyer's," he said. "We'll assume you know what a power of attorney is."

"When we sold some shares a Cockermouth lawyer wrote one for Mother," Constance replied. "The document empowers somebody to act for you; his signature on a check, or an agreement, goes where yours would go."

"Something like that," said Harden. "Now we'll go ahead. In the case Bob stated, I am A, and Mark is B. Until fourteen days from A's escape expire it is advisable for him to avoid recapture. In fact, I'd better lie doggo, and I think Alderswath the safest, and most attractive spot. Since Mark knows I wasn't there, he'll no doubt imagine I am not there now. Mark is persuaded he's logical."

"Yes; you must stop," said Constance.

"I reckoned on your kindness, and we will resume: It is advisable for A to consult with an alienist whose opinion carries weight, and ask for a certificate affirming that he is sane—I don't know; it might be risky! The next point's important.

"If A, by deed and power of attorney, authorized B to control and administer his estate so long as he was of unsound mind, the contract stands until A's saneness is mutually acknowledged, or established by the proper court. He goes on to state that, were a deed not executed, A's relations might apply for administrative power. Since they haven't, we'll let that go."

"It's awkward," Hugh remarked. "You are not willing for your cousin to control your estate?"

"Certainly not," said Harden, frowning. "It implies his controlling me. However, you see the drawback? A dead man cannot ask a judge to declare him sane. And he cannot, logically, consult with an alienist."

Constance gave him a troubled glance.

"But you cannot continue to pretend you are dead, Frank. Have you thought about your mother?"

"I have thought much," said Harden, in a queer, calm voice. "But we were talking about something else. For example, so long as I am supposititiously drowned, Balham and his confederate cannot blackmail me. Then it might help me spot the fellow for whose fault I have been forced to pay. I don't know how I am going to spot him, but sometimes your luck is better than you are justified to expect."

"Might your relations not ask for leave to assume you dead and seize your property?" said Hugh.

Harden smiled. "I believe they must wait for some time, and a useful part of all I've got was banked by Bob. When Mark begins to investigate, he will, no doubt, conclude I squandered the sum in town. We will talk about the power of attorney another time; I rather think I see a plan."

He put up the letter and balanced the envelope as if he were puzzled.

"It was thicker—— By George, the treasury notes! I left the bundle on the crag."

Hugh got up. He knew the Solway weather and a damp west wind had begun to blow. Sea and plain had vanished and a gray haze crept across the moor.

"Treasury notes are not waterproof. I think we'll start," he said.

When they reached the crag the terraced rock was indistinct and thin, slanted rain beat their faces.

"We were at the bottom, and now we are at the top," Harden remarked. "It's all I really know, and in the circumstances, I'll go straight down."

He jumped from a terrace and vanished behind an-

other. Stones crashed, and after a minute or two a shout echoed in the rocks.

"All's right. I have got the wad!"

By and by he rejoined the others and Constance's look got thoughtful.

"Sometimes your luck is better than you deserve, Frank," she remarked.

They steered for the ghyll, and in the morning Hugh went on foot to the coast road and got on board a motor bus. He imagined Mrs. Latimer was not keen to let him go and he promised to come back when Harden needed him.

VIII

HARDEN SEES A PLAN

NOT long after the excursion to Southwaite fell Hugh, recalled by Constance Latimer, again set out for Alderswath. Constance stated that her mother hoped he could conveniently visit with them, and she herself imagined Frank had got a job for him. To some extent Hugh was flattered. He had not thought his society had much attraction for his hosts; to enjoy theirs was rather a privilege, but it looked as if he had not jarred. All the same, he imagined Harden might be an awkward guest for two fastidious ladies, and he speculated about the undertaking for which Frank might use his help.

Hugh arrived in the evening. Mrs. Latimer was not yet back from Cockermouth, where she had gone in the vicar's car, but Constance and Harden occupied easy-chairs by the fireplace. For all its touch of old-fashioned dignity, the paneled room was homelike; Hugh had walked some distance, and for a time he was satisfied to muse while the others talked.

He thought Constance Latimer beautiful. The oil lamps were not yet lighted and reflections from the grate trembled on the brown wood and sparkled in her hair. Sometimes her silk stockings and her smooth green clothes shone. In line and color, she and her background harmonized. Hugh thought her marked by something of the haunting tranquillity that marked the old house.

He had no sister and his mother was long since dead. On the Northwest plains women were not numerous, and

the Scandinavian pioneers' strongly-built daughters had not Miss Latimer's charm. Then he was in France. In fact, he had grown up almost without women's society, and none he knew were remarkably cultivated. Well, he must not be a fool. Miss Latimer was thoroughbred and it looked as if Harden was her lover. Anyhow, Frank was her sort; one noted his graceful carelessness, and for all his humorous talk, one sensed the pride he had inherited. Hugh admitted he himself was not graceful; by contrast with Frank, he was, rather, solid and perhaps uncouth.

"You sent for me," he said to Constance. "I imagine the call was really Frank's. Anyhow, I have arrived."

Harden laughed. "*Here, sir!* George, on parade, when an officer calls the roll. Well, he and Jock were men one liked to know, and I admit your habit is to be where you are wanted. It looks as if mine is not. Then one notes your modesty. However, I expect the implication is, since you have arrived, we might get to work?"

"I don't know if I use much tact, but by and by Mrs. Latimer will be back," said Hugh.

Constance gave him a friendly smile. She altogether approved Hugh Nicol. *Adsum* was the proper motto for a useful man. She pictured his calm answer when friendship or duty called.

"That is so," said Harden. "I doubt if we could persuade Mrs. Latimer; Constance at first did not like my plan. Very well, Cousin Mark, by deed and power of attorney, controls the part of my inheritance I did not trust to Bob, and for reasons already stated, we cannot set the lawyers on to him. In consequence, I propose to steal the documents."

Hugh glanced at Constance. He had not expected her to agree, and her look was thoughtful, but she said in a quiet voice:

"Frank's relations are not his friends, and I do not think Mark Gardiner ought to control his fortune."

"The plan," said Harden, smiling, "is not as absurd as it perhaps looks. I believe the deed is in an old safe at Thorshope, and since nothing very important is kept there, Mark does not carry the key about. I don't expect he knows I know its hiding-place in my father's desk. Then you see, Thorshope was my home, and at one time I now and then climbed in by a window after excursions I imagined my mother would not approve. The window is high in the old north wall, but where one has gone before, one ought to go again."

"Is your cousin now at Thorshope?" Hugh inquired.

"It's possible. When he is at his Glasgow office he often comes down by an evening train and always at week-ends. Some of the lot, no doubt, are there. Thorshope is an old house and the shooting's good. If you knew the Gardiners, you'd know why they liked it. The queer thing is, although Aveling is English, you feel he, so to speak, *belongs*——"

Hugh remarked a note of bitterness. He thought Constance sympathized, but she smiled.

"Frank tries to be modest. For all that, the Hardens of Thorshope were Scottish lairds, and he thinks the Gardiners are not."

"They are pushful merchants; tripe merchants," Harden rejoined with a laugh. "You see their portraits in the newspapers; following otter hounds, and weighing salmon they did not catch. Mark and the sea-trout was a first-class fake; the trout was a waterlogged branch pulled down by the fast stream. All the same, Aveling is a cool, quick shot and he can catch a trout with a dry fly in a calm pool. But we were planning a burglary and must get on with the job."

"I do not see my particular job," Hugh remarked.

"While I am engaged in the library-office, you will keep the landing at the stair head, or another strategic post. You see, Mark is a hefty fellow and Aveling's nerve is good. Although the fourteen days are up, I have not yet got a fresh mad doctor's certificate."

"There's the risk," said Constance quietly.

"Sometimes one must front a risk, and on the whole I don't think it daunting. If they seized me, I believe they must get a magistrate to re-certify; in Scotland the sheriff is perhaps the proper man, and the old fellow was my father's pal. However, I am not going to be seized, and if he were forced, I'd reckon on Hugh's knocking out cousin Mark. The tripe merchant, rolling down the stairs, would be a joyous spectacle."

Hugh wondered. Frank's humor was freakish, and, after all, his relations were perhaps entitled to some sympathy. The proper line was to refuse to help, but he saw Constance thought he ought to go. In a way, it was puzzling.

"Unless Mark Gardiner has the documents, nobody but Frank can use his money," she said.

"In the meantime, Frank cannot do so. Then by and by the others will be entitled to claim——"

"I rather doubt," Harden interrupted. "I begin to hope for a theatrical resurrection. But are you going?"

"It looks as if I must. Up to a point, your staff-work's good, but not very long since it carried you to a channel in the sands, which you could not cross."

Harden said they must properly weigh the scheme, and when Mrs. Latimer arrived all was fixed. Hugh imagined they might be fronted by obstacles on which the other did not calculate. In fact, from a sober Cumbrian's point of view, the excursion was frankly ridiculous. Yet, unless

they allowed Gardiner to use the power the deed gave him, Hugh admitted he did not see another plan.

In the morning he and Harden took the road for the coast. They lunched at the station hotel in a small iron-smelting town, and although Harden's portrait, blurred by rain, yet occupied a board at the police office, nobody seemed to be interested by their arrival. After lunch they crossed the railway to the harbor, and found two or three small Scottish trawl boats in the muddy basin behind the blast furnaces. One skipper told them he was going home as soon as his boat floated, and if the breeze, as usual, got up with the flood tide, he reckoned to make Annan in about three hours. If they liked, they might come on board, but if he was a gentleman, he would sooner go by train, and he would not say but it might be drier.

Hugh agreed. Harden's route, so to speak, was circuitous, but he had perhaps an object and the scheme was his. Returning to the Station Road, they stopped at a ship-chandler's shop, where Harden bought two black oil-skin jackets, some Manila rope, a sailor's kit bag, and a good electric lamp of the sort an engineer might use in a steamship's tunnel. He declared he did not want a footling toyshop torch. Hugh had begun to remark that as a rule Harden knew exactly what he did want and used the best articles.

About two o'clock the muddy tide swirled into the basin and they went on board. The black-leaded sails were hoisted; hefty Scottish fishermen seized the ropes and tramped along the pier. By the old iron beacon in which coal fires had lighted ships to port, the ropes were let go and the trawler swung out on the urgent tide.

The afternoon was gray. Criffell and Skiddaw, magnified by caps of cloud, dominated the tossing firth. A fresh wind blew behind the boat, but since the current went the

same way the white-topped waves were small. All the same, her topsail was down, and had they hauled her on the wind, Hugh imagined angry water would sweep her deck. Now and then the long boom lurched up high above the rolling hull and the black mainsail swelled like a balloon; for the most part, the head-sails slackly flapped about. The skipper balanced on the coaming, a tiller-line round his wrist, and laconically answered Hugh's remark.

"Ay, the west is thickening. We might get mair wind, and maybe rain, when the ebb sets doon the firth."

"You always get wind on the Solway," said Hugh, and reflected that a forty-mile trip on a motorcycle was part of Harden's plan.

"I have fished in calmer watter," the Scot agreed.

"Their not finding the young fellow who was lost on the sands was queer," Harden remarked in a careless voice.

"They'll never fin' him. If the flood tide had stranded his body, the marsh herds and haaf-net men would ha' seen 't in the next twelve hours. They did not. He wasny there."

Hugh admitted that the skipper was logical. A Scot refuses to argue about an obvious fact.

"Then where d'you think he went?" Harden inquired.

"Doon the firth. The ebb rins five knots an hour to Southerness, and three knots afterwards, and it rins seeven hours. I reckon he'd float that long; when your clothes are thick and the stream gangs fast, ye do not sink, and onyway, he'd row alang the bottom. At slack watter he'd rest and settle in the sand. Solway sand's never quiate and hauds a' it grips."

It looked as if Harden was satisfied, and since Hugh imagined his relations had taken an expert's opinion, they had some grounds to think him gone for good. Lighting

his pipe, he looked about. To starboard, pale flame leaped up from twin blast-furnace towers. Ahead, long rows of sandhills rolled swiftly back. Criffell's black mass was plainer; Skiddaw got indistinct. But for the white flecks where small waves broke, the firth was the color of lead; the urgent tide went smoothly and one must mark the flitting coast to calculate its speed.

Hugh mused about Constance Latimer. Although her clothes and her pluck were modern, she stood for the best traditions the old school had used. She was gracious, calm, sincere, and proud. Moreover, she was beautiful, with a beauty that somehow carried the stamp of her qualities.

Hugh admired Constance Latimer. The word was perhaps the proper word, for he thought sex attraction had nothing to do with it. In fact, her mother's charm was almost as marked. One knew the true note and the perfect line, one, perhaps awkwardly, sought the best; but he was rather a workman than an artist and his job was to plough. Yet, so long as one made the best job possible with the tools one could command—— Hugh smiled. Since he had enjoyed Miss Latimer's society, it looked as if he had got fastidious; he certainly had got romantic. Anyhow, he was on board a rolling trawlboat that stank of decayed shrimps, and he hoped the fool adventure would not end at a police station.

A hump-backed wooden pier sped past; and then a thin church spire, high white houses, and a row of bungalows rolled back and melted in the gray sky. A bay opened up, and the tide, pouring across a shoal in front, met the eddy that revolved behind a point. The stream piled up in short, white-topped ridges.

"A bit tide-rip across the bank's tail," said the skipper. "We'll let her wallop through."

Blocks rattled. The boom went up, and when the boat rolled to windward, pointed to the sky. But for the firm hand on the tiller, Hugh knew the long spar might lurch across and the crash break the mast. White rollers fell apart under the thrusting bows, water surged about the deck, and spray beat the black sails. Then the turmoil was astern and the reunited stream went savagely up the firth. The skipper shook the water from his coat.

"If we had been gaun to wind'ard, ye might have got wet," he said.

Hugh thought it possible; the Scot's habit is not to exaggerate.

"Oh, well, in Cumberland one is used with getting wet."

"Just that," remarked the other and indicated the blurred hills behind the bowsprit end. "I wouldny say oor side is kenspecuiously dry."

After a time, the firth got narrow and the tide swept them up a muddy river mouth where buoys and punts swung about in the eddies. A man, crouching by the bowsprit, deftly seized the proper punt, rusty mooring chains were hauled on board, and the black sails dropped. Harden put some money on the deck. The skipper calculated, and pushed back two coins.

"Since ye're for Carlisle, ye'll need to tak' the bus. Forby, if ye're soon at the station, the train from Glasgow stops."

The deckhand landed them, and Harden remarked: "The argument is not very obvious, but he means to be just. Sometimes I think we are a calumniated lot."

"On the whole, to be just is harder than to be generous," said Hugh.

They took a cinder path across some boggy fields, and in the stormy dusk joined the main street of a small Scottish town. A white hotel, decorated by motor signs, occu-

pied one end; the street was long and straight, and wide in parts like a market square. Good shops and low whinstone houses with dormer windows in the roofs bordered the pavement. One noted a tall church spire, and a monument in the motorists' fairway.

"Carlyle called him the Prophet," Harden told Hugh. "So far, he has escaped the tourists' cars, but a motor bus may yet demolish him. In the meantime, I think we ought to have taken the other road."

The station was across some fields and soon after they arrived the train from Glasgow stopped. In about twenty-five minutes they got down at Carlisle.

"Up to the present," said Harden, "we have advanced by plan. We will now look for a good motorcycle."

"We might have come up from the coast by train," Hugh rejoined. "Then, since our road goes back not far from Annan, you might have got a bicycle there."

"Not at all," said Harden. "If you're interested, you might think about it."

Hugh shrugged. Sometimes Frank puzzled him. Thorshope was west of Annan, and to go back, eighteen miles, the other way, was a queer maneuver. All the same, the plan was his.

Before Harden was satisfied they searched three garages. It looked as if he knew something about motorcycles and was resolved to run no risk. Then they got some food at a picture-house restaurant, and for nearly two hours watched the strange adventures of an American crook. Hugh thought the fellow's exploits were not much more extravagant than Frank's.

When they returned to the garage Hugh put on his oil-skin coat and firmly braced up. The adventure was ridiculous, but he had started and he was going through. Harden wheeled out the bicycle, the engine throbbed, and

they got on board. For some moments Harden cautiously threaded the traffic in a narrow street; then they turned by the battlemented law courts and rolled past two or three red motor buses and a few taxicabs.

The street in front was wide and quiet, and Harden drove faster. At its end the dark shops vanished, lights shone on water, and they jolted between the tramlines on Eden bridge. A keen wind blew up river and a half moon pierced the flying clouds. Hugh saw the current break in sparkling ripples and the bleak square castle keep across the river flats. Then, but for the railway lamps, all was dark, and they climbed a steep hill.

At the top Harden let the engine go. The west wind screamed past Hugh's bent head; the quiet houses melted, and with the head lamp's beam flashing mistily in front, they took the road for Scotland.

IX

ANNE TAKES THE STAGE

WATER splashed about the wheels, the narrow road was stony, and Hugh, jolting on the pillion, hoped Thorshope was not far off. Since they swung northwest at Gretna he had but seldom seen a light, and the keen wind that swept the shore flats had followed them into the folding hills. A mile or two back, Harden had left a wider road, and he now drove cautiously up a shallow glen. Blurred trees flitted by, and when the wind for a few moments dropped one heard angry water.

The motorcycle slowed and skidded. Hugh's boot splashed in a pool. Cold and cramped, he staggered, but when the front wheel took the grass he steadied the machine and Harden got down. Pushing the motorcycle into a boggy lane, they went back to the road and stopped by a dry-stone wall.

Behind the wall, a rocky bank dropped sixty or seventy feet and at the bottom dark water brawled in a stony channel. Hugh could not distinguish whether the stream was a small river or a large burn. Anyhow, in the pool where the channel curved it was deep.

A gust swept the clouds from the moon and he saw the stream looped about a peninsula. The spur was terraced by gardens and lawns, and a high, square house occupied one end. The house was not large, and Hugh did not think it very old, although it was in something of the Scottish baronial style. Somebody, a hundred years since,

had perhaps rebuilt an older house, for in utilitarian Scotland one has not much respect for ancient monuments.

A little farther downstream, on his side of the water, a steep wood pushed out to the edge of the receding channel and a pool sparkled in the moon. Then the noise of tossing trees drowned the current's turmoil, big drops splashed Hugh's oilskin, and the picture faded.

"Where do we get over?" he asked.

"Stepping-stones cross a shallow behind the wood. The main road goes by a bridge and up the other bank, but the iron gate at the lodge is noisy," Harden replied. "If we had arrived sooner, the lights might have indicated who was at the house. The drawback was, we must wait until all had gone to bed, and when you lurk about in a dripping wood you risk cold feet."

"Action is easier," Hugh agreed. "It does not look as if your cousin entertained a house party."

"Mark himself might not be there, but now his star is rising, Thorshope is a sort of headquarters for the clan. Helen and my mother are his supporters, and for a time Aveling had the house, which ought to have been mine—I don't know who is there, but they have gone to bed, and we will get to work."

They took the lane behind the wood. Hugh smelt dead oak leaves and felt water splash about his boots. Naked branches tossed and groaned, and the wind in the trees was louder than the stream. When they were at the bottom of the wood the moon pierced the clouds, and faint silvery light touched swirling water and a row of large stones whose tops were level with the flood.

"One or two are covered," said Harden. "If you jump short, drive your boots into the gravel and front up stream. The current must not get behind your knees."

"Quite!" said Hugh. "I doubt if your burn runs

harder than the Solway tide. But how do you light the house?"

"We used oil. Mark put up a petrol engine and dynamo. I know where the master switch is. But follow me across."

Where the stones were under water the jumps were long, but they reached the other side, and crossing a wet meadow, climbed a steep rocky bank. At the top a buttress braced a corner of the house, and Hugh imagined the wall was at one time the front of a Border tower. Frost and rain had widened the joints in the stones and the buttress was broken and rough. Five or six yards up, a small window pierced the thick wall.

"This parts old," said Harden. "You can jar the window fastening back. Mark, no doubt, imagines nobody could get up, but when you know the proper holds—Anyhow, you will have the rope."

He pulled off his oilskin coat, and fastening the rope round his shoulder and under one arm, began to climb the buttress. Since the stones were wet and spotted by lichen, the climb was awkward, but he got up and at the top stood with his face to the wall and his boot in a joint. The window was about three feet off, and as far as Hugh could distinguish, nearly level with his chest. In order to reach it, he must swing across, and but for the depth of the embrasure he could reckon on no support. Hugh thought the exploit impossible.

Harden's arm went out sideways and his body swung from the buttress top. For the most part, he was under the window, but it looked as if his arm was in the embrasure, and he had found some rest for his foot. Anyhow, the window rattled and Harden's legs and body vanished.

In a few moments the rope jerked, and when Hugh

reached the embrasure Harden pulled him over the ledge and ordered him to remove his boots.

"Keep touch; I will steer you," he said. "The room is a sort of junk-store and an old iron hip bath is somewhere about. The thing rings like a bell."

A flash from his lamp crossed the boards and touched the door. It opened without much noise and they crept along a short passage in the dark. Then Harden stopped and again flashed the light about. The beam touched polished wood and sparkled on the brass dial of an old tall clock, flickered across a wall and a carved newel post, and went out. Hugh saw nothing distinctly, but it looked as if they were in a gallery from which two wide staircases went down to a large hall.

"Here's your stand," said Harden in a quiet voice. "Two passages meet the stairs; the one at this end is the one usually occupied, but I've known the housekeeper change the round. The servants' rooms are in the roof and their stairs are across the house. I'm going to the office near the junk-shop. You will watch the gallery."

"What about the main light-control?"

Harden hesitated. "I'd be forced to go down to the hall, and I might need a good light in the office; the curtains are thick—in fact, I think we'll leave the switch alone."

He vanished and Hugh leaned against the gallery rails. A notched molding on the coping rather hurt his back, and he frankly hoped Harden would soon return. All was dark, but the night was unquiet. The stream's turmoil echoed in the hall on a high chiming note, and sometimes the trees roared like angry surf. Boards cracked and puzzling draughts touched his skin.

When he looked over the balustrade the gloom below was impenetrable, but the beam from Harden's lamp had

helped him picture his surroundings. Two staircases and two passages joined the gallery; but at one end another passage, in line with the gallery, went to the room by which they had entered and the office where Harden was. Hugh thought this passage short; it must soon reach the house's outer wall. His boots were in the room and the rope was at the window. Very well, so long as he could keep the stair head where the bedroom passage ended, Harden's retreat was secure. If they were surprised, Hugh, after holding the fort while the other got away, must run for the window and slide down the rope. His pursuers would probably hesitate to follow him in the dark. The plan looked all right, but he hoped he would not be forced to try if it would work.

The passage most generally occupied was the danger spot, particularly since it commanded the junk-room, and after a time Hugh crept along it for a few yards. All was quiet and he returned to the gallery. He heard the wind, and then a faint metallic clink. Light swept along the gallery and somebody said:

"Put up your hands!"

Hugh did not. In the Canada he knew, gunmen were not numerous, for a moment he was dazzled, and he mechanically stepped back. The notched molding on the rail jarred his spine, and he saw, first of all, the shining barrels of a gun; and then, behind the gun, a girl. The gun was not at her shoulder, but he noted the turn of her hand on the pistol-grip and her bent left arm. The young woman knew how to shoot and when the barrels swiftly went up he imagined they would point where she meant. A boy's gun, but after all, a twenty-bore's load was three-quarters of an ounce of lead. Then he remarked something he thought she did not.

"Left turn! Then straight to the door at the top of the stairs," she said.

Hugh did not move. He hoped she would concentrate on the gun and forget that she could shout for help. She was short and he thought attractively built, although a kimono covered most of her body; anyhow, he supposed the thin drapery was a kimono. Her short hair and her eyes were brown, and she carried her small head proudly, rather as if she began to be annoyed. Then, where the kimono stopped, he saw a slim white leg and a foot in an ornamental bedroom slipper, and he discreetly turned his head. The swift, flashlight picture went straight to the spot in his brain where indelible memories are stored. Yet the light was now steady; she had, no doubt, touched a switch in the wall.

"Are you not going?" she inquired.

"I'm sorry, but I'd sooner not," Hugh replied in an apologetic voice.

She frowned, as if she were puzzled. Before he studied her, she had, of course, studied him. She saw a large young man who did not seem to be much afraid. At all events, he fronted her squarely, his head slightly tilted, and except for a few moments when his glance wandered, his eyes were fixed, almost calmly, on her face. Yet, she had thought him embarrassed, and she kicked the drapery across her leg.

"In a moment I'll shoot. Start at once," she said.

She jerked the gun threateningly. Hugh shrugged.

"If I must—— When I get to the door? It seems to be shut."

"You can turn the knob. Don't talk. Be quick!"

Hugh went along the gallery. When she gave him the last order he sensed a note of strain. He had not bothered to talk quietly and he hoped her voice had carried. Har-

den ought perhaps to have heard them, but so far as Hugh could distinguish, all was quiet. He, however, had begun to see his line. At the end of the passage the light was not good, and when he pushed back the door, hardly pierced the gloom in the room. He heard the girl's steps, two or three yards off, but the key was not on the outside and he stole behind the door.

She advanced another yard and stopped. Perhaps she saw the key was not where she had thought, and she perhaps wondered where he had gone. Hugh jumped and seized the gun; and then stretching out his leg, hooked his boot behind the door and threw it back, against the post. The gun was his and his other arm was round the girl's soft waist. She struck his face with a clenched fist, and her slender, flexible body writhed like a snake, but he firmly pulled her head against his chest.

"I do not want to hurt you," he gasped. "All the same, to shout would be rash, and anyhow the door is shut. You know where the control is. Snap on the light!"

She had perhaps not thought to get the order, but when he pushed her back, light leaped about the room and he saw she leaned against the end of a couch. Her face was red, she breathed fast, and she clutched the kimono to her waist with a shaking hand. Hugh broke the gun, pushed the cartridges into his pocket and threw the piece on the couch.

"There will be no shooting. My apology's sincere but short; I seized you because I was forced. You, I suppose, are little Anne?"

She gave him a rather haughty glance, but it looked as if she were less disturbed. Hugh imagined her curiosity was excited.

"I am Anne Aveling. You, no doubt, do not use your proper name and I expect only the police know who you

are. You might, however, like to know that my jewelry is not worth stealing, and the Thorshope silver is old Sheffield plate."

"All that really matters is, I am Frank's pal. He is now in the library, trying to open the safe, and since he has been longer than he thought, you might perhaps look him up."

The blood leaped to Anne's skin, but she laughed.

"I am sorry, but I had some grounds to be annoyed. However, it's not important. I believe I know what Frank wants and I know where the key is."

The room was suddenly dark, but she steered Hugh to the door, and put off the light in the gallery. He followed her along the junk-room passage, and after a moment or two she quietly opened a door. Harden, kneeling by a safe, jumped up and took her in his arms; Hugh remarked that she rather firmly pushed him back. Then while Harden replied to her eager questions he returned a number of dusty papers and some letter files to the safe.

"I have got the deed," he said by and by. "Who is in the house?"

"Helen and your mother. Perhaps you ought not to startle them, Frank."

Harden frowned. "You use some tact; I rather think you meant they mustn't be *alarmed*. Anyhow, I must put these blighted documents where they were before. Mark's as methodical as he's parsimonious. Seems to keep every twopence-halfpenny agreement and receipt."

"I imagined I had caught a burglar," Anne resumed. "For a man, your friend thinks and moves fast. Before I knew, he had got my gun and seized me."

Harden looked up with a grin.

"Then I expect he imagined he had caught a wild cat."

"I was forced, Miss Aveling. You see, you might have called for help," said Hugh.

"In some circumstances, I might have shot you," Anne remarked.

"The risk was not very daunting. For one thing, I expect the gun is not yours."

"It was Frank's first gun. Mark's butler is old and getting deaf; the other manservant sleeps at the lodge. Not long since two country houses were broken into, and Thorshope is a lonely spot. But I am not going to apologize for hiding the old gun in my room. When I shoot, I use a hammerless."

"Exactly!" said Hugh, smiling. "If the safety bolt is not engaged, you pull the trigger. With a hammer gun, you must, of course, pull up the hammers, and yours were *down*."

Anne colored, as if she were annoyed.

"You reckoned a frightened, highly strung girl would forget?"

"You were not frightened," said Hugh. "Might I state that I thought you a remarkably brave young lady?"

"Sometimes one is justified to be vulgar, and I thought you the limit," Anne rejoined. "Besides, you are not old enough to be grandfatherly, and I am not remarkably juvenile. Little Anne is Frank's invention. When a man thinks he's humorous, he's generally tiresome."

"Anyhow, you're as stanch as steel, but you mustn't dispute with Hugh," said Harden and carefully replaced the last file in the safe. "Now I think all's straight, and when Mark wants the deed he must solve the puzzle; where—let's say, on earth—it's gone. In the meantime, we must take the road. Not a word about us, Anne dear. You'll be secret as the grave."

He fastened the safe, put back the key, and gave Hugh his electric lamp. Hugh went in front and when they reached the junk-room got on the window-ledge. Anne, a moment afterwards, crossed the floor.

"I do not yet know who you are; Frank forgot—" she said, and added with a laugh: "In all the circumstances, I admit you were a sport."

Hugh went down the wall, and when Harden joined him Anne threw down the rope and fastened the window. By and by they pushed the bicycle into the road and Harden looked about. The moon was gone and the dark trees roared in the wind.

"I doubt if Mark will ever know we were at the house, but we'll retire by plan," he said. "After a pretty strenuous day, I expect you are not keen about riding to Carlisle in a Solway gale."

Hugh said he was not, and steering north, they jolted for some time up and down steep hills. Then Harden joined a trunk road going the other way, and soon afterwards railway lights began to shine ahead. Two hundred yards from the station he got down and occupied himself with the back-wheel valve. When they pushed the machine along the platform the tire was flat and a porter came from the ticket office.

"Does a train go south before morning?" Harden inquired.

The porter said one went through in about twenty minutes, but if signaled, would take up passengers.

"Carlisle's first stop," he added.

"We are going farther, but you see the tire. In the morning we must get a new tube. But you might get our tickets and warn your signal man."

The porter went off and Harden laughed.

"You'll admit the staff-work was pretty good?"

"Our luck perhaps was good," said Hugh. "Are you taking the rope to Alderswath?"

"I think not," said Harden. "You are entitled to forget small details, so long as the main scheme is sound. We'll throw the thing out on the line and at daybreak a surface-man will no doubt speculate how it got there; but if he's a Borderer, he'll haud a quiate sough and stick to the good rope."

X

A SPRING DAY'S EXCURSION

FOR two or three weeks Hugh was usefully occupied at Beckfoot farm. All the leys were not yet ploughed, the soil began to dry, and for all the biting winds, the willow shoots put on fresh color and one sensed spring's advance. In a few weeks, the sheep on the netted turnips must be finished for sale, and two men must feed and turn the cutters night and morning. Corn stacks, built in showery autumn where the crop was grown, must be moved and threshed; thorn dykes waited the slasher, and manure must be scaled about the meadows.

In Canada, Hugh had concentrated on growing wheat. In the Old Country a farmer's jobs were numerous and diffuse. Moreover, when the rain stopped, as many as possible must be carried on at once. Hugh reckoned himself a good ploughman, and from breakfast until dusk he steered the big Clydesdales across the crackling stubble. At dusk he got a hot bath and put on fresh clothes, which is not altogether usual in Cumberland and Canada, but the Nicols were statesmen and the large farm was theirs.

When a ploughman and his horses know their job, his labor to some extent is mechanical, and Hugh, plodding behind his strong team, looked about and mused. He saw the rooks and black-headed gulls toss like leaves in the Solway blast and sweep down to search the fresh-turned furrow. He marked a hare that crouched behind the dead weeds and waited for him to pass, and he heard the cur-

lew's tremolo courting note. Twice a day he heard a famous express roar across the flats, and at intervals a blatant motor bus. He imagined motor buses were not yet running by the Peace River.

Now he thought about it, his Saskatchewan homestead sometimes was lonely, and when he built his shack in the Alberta wilds the quiet might be worse. When he was demobbed he had thought all he wanted was to be allowed to concentrate on his farming, but since he knew Harden and Constance Latimer his ambitions got wider and his horizon, so to speak, extended.

All the same, his knowing Constance had not, directly, much to do with the vague discontent that began to bother him. Her cultivation was higher than his; she was gracious because she could not be unkind, but were he rich, he had not the qualities that might attract a girl like that. Besides, he had some grounds to think Harden her lover.

Anne Aveling was different. Like the other, she was thoroughbred, but her school was the modern school, and he thought her frankly and warmly human. In fact, he had sensed an impetuous temper and perhaps a vein of coquetry. For a moment he had held her in his arms. It looked as if his apology had satisfied Miss Aveling, although she declared that in some circumstances she might have shot him and he imagined she did not boast. Hugh smiled. Little Anne had forgotten to pull up the hammers of her gun; but no circumstances would justify his seizing Miss Latimer.

Anyhow, when the leys were ploughed he was entitled to a holiday. He wanted to study by daylight the scene of Frank's exploit, and Thorshope was a picturesque spot. Moreover, if his luck were good, he might see Miss Aveling. At length, the roaring winds were quiet and the bitter showers stopped, and one morning when the sun

shone Hugh got on his brother's rusty bicycle and took the road for the West. He carried a small camera, some sandwiches, and good prismatic glasses.

Hugh was not an expert cyclist and Thorshope was farther off than he had thought. The road went steadily up hill to the bleak Dumfries moors, and when he climbed the hope where the peat-stained water runs he was frankly tired and it was time for lunch.

Leaving the bicycle behind a gate, Hugh went down the wood and ate his sandwiches in a nook by the waterside. He hoped the path he had followed justified his stopping there, but all was quiet and it did not look as if he would be disturbed. In fact, he would sooner have seen somebody about the house.

The sun was on the sparkling water and a loud thrush sang. A few pale primroses pushed through the dead leaves; he saw delicate wood-sorrel. On the other side, across a pasture where wild anemonies grew, terraced gardens, lawns, and two ledged paths went up to the flagged walk in front of the tall house. Thorshope for all its pepper-box turrets, was not picturesque, and only where one buttressed end dropped to the rocks by the waterside did it look old. Hugh thought it solid, bleak, and somehow Scottish. Yet, half-circled by the looping water and flanked by a thick beechwood, the peninsula it occupied was marked by sylvan charm.

Hugh smoked his pipe and photographed the buttressed wall, pierced by the deep window, through which he had crept. The rope had helped him climb and some stones were broken, but he did not see how Harden had got up in the dark. Hugh pulled out his watch and frowned. Two o'clock, and allowing for the down-hill road and a wind behind him along the shore flats, he doubted if he could reach Beckfoot in three hours.

He looked up and was suddenly interested. A servant carried out two folding chairs and some cushions and rugs. She went off and when two ladies came from the porch Hugh picked up his glasses. He wondered whether he was shabby, but after all the ladies had not much grounds to resent his glance, and if nobody joined them he would steal off.

One was older than the other. Her figure was tall and thin, her clothes were in the recent fashion and she moved along the terrace with short, quick steps. Yet, since Hugh's glasses were good, he imagined her youthful carriage sprang from a resolve not to acknowledge the stealthy advance of age. He pictured her hard and socially talented, a witty talker where one talked about nothing important. He knew her restless by her step and impatient gesture. Harden's mother, Mrs. Aveling!

Her companion was less tall, and, like Frank, rather gracefully built. Her clothes were fashionable. Hugh imagined Scottish gentlewomen of the old school did not bother about their clothes on the first fine day in spring. The sun called them to the drying moors and the woods by the waterside. The younger lady's look was youthful, but her glance was calculating. To study her through the powerful glasses was like studying a close-up on the film, and he wondered whether she did not use the aids-to-beauty film actresses used. An up-to-date restaurant in town was rather her background than a Scottish country house. Yet she was a Borderer; Frank's ambitious sister, Mrs. Cameron. He began to know the people Frank was up against.

Then Hugh thrilled. He admitted he was ridiculous, but at length his excursion was rewarded. Anne Aveling crossed the terrace; Hugh would have known her had he not used the glasses. By contrast with the others, her step

and carriage were free and unstudied; one felt she stood for fresh, joyous youth. Then her clothes were speckled Border cloth. On the hills, her small figure would melt, as a partridge melts, into the gray bent grass.

Mrs. Aveling now occupied a garden chair. She signed, and Anne going to a bench close by, brought her a rug. Hugh admitted Mrs. Aveling was entitled to command her stepdaughter, but he imagined she liked to be indulged. When she had got the rug she would want a book, and then perhaps a footstool. He had known women like that, although they were not numerous on the Canadian plains.

Putting up the glasses, he pushed the case behind his back. He was not going to study Anne Aveling when she did not know. Besides, he could see her without the glasses, and so long as she was on the terrace, he was content to stop.

Dead leaves rustled, a stick cracked, and Hugh turned his head. Behind the thin hazel branches a man came down the path. His gray knickerbockers and shooting coat were good; Hugh thought they were not cut by a country tailor. The other was obviously going to Thorshope, and he got up.

"I hope I do not trespass, sir," he said.

The gentleman stopped and leaned on his long iron-pointed stick; the sort of stick one carries when one follows otter hounds. He was tall and thin, and breathed rather quickly, as if the descent of the steep bank had fatigued him. His skin was pale and somehow Hugh pictured his moving quietly and hating to be conspicuous. Constance Latimer had stated that Aveling was rather *colorless*. Yet Hugh imagined the pale, thin man had some useful qualities.

"Not at all. The path follows the water to the Mains

farm," Aveling replied politely, and glanced at Hugh's camera on a mossy stone. "You are a photographer?"

"I am not an expert," said Hugh. "Perhaps I ought not to have photographed the house, but the buttressed end with the turret is picturesque, and rather like an old Border tower."

Aveling noted his modesty. As a rule, English excursionists went where they wanted to go and when they dug up wildflowers did not apologize. Moreover, he felt rather slack, and for the next hour or two had no particular occupation.

"It was, I believe, a pele tower, but the Borderers did not use buttresses. They liked a clean wall, down which they could drop large stones on troublesome visitors. Then I doubt if they could build pepper-pot turrets."

"But the half-round, corner turret is Scottish, sir."

"It is rather Franco-Flemish. Scottish soldiers of fortune carried home plans of castles in the Low Countries. Are you an antiquary?"

Hugh said he was not, but the old fortified churches and manors in Cumberland interested him. He did not know if it justified his photographing Thorshope.

"Oh, well," said Aveling, "you would not get much of a picture with your small camera. Thorshope is not in any way remarkable, but, if you like, you might see the house."

Hugh reflected that he might see Miss Aveling, and he accompanied her father across the stepping-stones. When they climbed the terraced path, Anne got up and he thought she meant to join them, but she stopped, as if she saw who he was. He must not force her to acknowledge him; for Frank's sake, she must not do so. They passed her on the flagged walk, and Aveling said they were going to look over the house. Hugh fixed his eyes in front, but Anne gave him a careless glance, the sort of glance that indi-

cated faint curiosity. He thought it well done, but to some extent perhaps every girl was an actress. Yet he vaguely felt she signaled.

He ought not to look back. If he did so, he would deserve the glance of cold surprise he might get. All the same, he felt Anne waited for him to turn his head, and since Aveling now looked the other way, he risked it. His heart beat. Anne's smile was frankly humorous. Somehow she implied that she knew why he was there and approved his cleverness. But he mustn't exaggerate; the joke was perhaps his thinking she did approve.

Aveling stopped for a few moments in the square hall.

"About eighteen hundred; an indifferent copy of an earlier English model. The enclosure-acts were bearing fruit, corn was dear, and Scottish lairds had money for building experiments. Let's go upstairs."

In the gallery, two spears were crossed above a battered helmet.

"The steel cap and I think the spear heads are genuine," he resumed. "At all events, the stuff is hammer forged. Some fakers naïvely work up rolling-mill material. I don't know about the ash shafts. Ash is not a remarkably durable wood."

Hugh imagined Aveling knew his subject, but he concentrated on a portrait under the old steel cap. The bull-necked officer's uniform was up-to-date and the shoulder straps carried a captain's stars. Hugh had seen the fellow before, on a hotel steps behind the line in France.

"Might I inquire who the officer is?" he asked.

"Mr. Mark Gardiner is Thorshope's most recent owner, and my wife's relation. Since he is now engaged in the real-estate business, he has let his military title go."

Aveling's voice was careless, but somehow Hugh sensed satirical humor. Mark Gardiner's head under the moss-

trooper's spears and the steel cap was perhaps the joke. Yet the fellow had fronted as stubborn fights as ever the old cattle thieves had known. One might hate the red-faced bully, but one did not doubt his pluck. The queer thing was, his company had broken but he himself was not hurt.

Aveling went along the gallery and indicated an arquebus.

"The piece was supposititiously captured at Flodden, and it is possible, although the Scots on that occasion did not load up much booty. A ban of German hagbutteers, paid by the English, marched across from Bewcastle. That's all our collection. You might like to see the tower."

He took Hugh to the junk-room and looked about.

"Two or three chairs deserve a better place, although they would not harmonize with flimsy modern stuff. I believe this was the old pele's first floor. The Borderers used the ground floor for an emergency stable, and sometimes went up an outside ladder, which could be removed. The narrow door was in the other wall. The window is the original embrasure, although the frame and glass, of course, are not."

He crossed the floor, and stopping by the embrasure, resumed: "The fastening is a Birmingham job and worth about one and sixpence, but I imagined the window had not been opened since the house was mine. Yet the paint is broken and the wooden ledge is scratched, as if somebody had crawled across. We reckoned to climb up was impossible. Are you a mountaineer?"

Hugh, as carelessly as possible, said he was not, and joining Aveling, looked down the wall. For a moment or two he would sooner not look up.

"Without help from inside, the climb would baffle me. The buttress is awkward; and then one must reach for the window and swing across. Of course, if one had a

confederate in the house—— But a confederate could leave a window open at a much easier spot."

"That is so," Aveling agreed. "Mark's servants are trustworthy, and, after all, so far as I know, there is nothing in the house to reward a fastidious thief. Suppose we go to the top? The coping is, for the most part, the original battlement."

The leaded roof commanded a noble view. Aveling gave Hugh a cigarette, and for a time they leaned against the old wall and smoked. Hugh liked Harden's stepfather. Aveling was obviously not a business man, but it looked as if he knew men and women and in his humorous philosophy one sensed an acid vein. One felt that he was tired and perhaps physically infirm.

When he had smoked his cigarette, Hugh said he must go. Nobody was now on the terrace, and although he admitted his disappointment was ridiculous he went rather moodily down the steps. At the bottom of the lower garden, the path for a short distance followed by a supporting wall, and near the end a stone dropped at Hugh's feet. Looking up, he saw Miss Aveling on the wall. Since the gardens were terraced he imagined the spot was not commanded by the house. All he saw was Anne's small figure and the serene sky.

"Yes," she said with a twinkle, "I waited for you! For one thing, I thought you would like to know Frank's visit to his proper home has not been remarked, and nothing indicates that Mark knows his safe was opened."

"You were kind," said Hugh. "About twenty minutes since, Mr. Aveling noted some scratches on the window ledge. We studied the wall and decided that nobody could climb up. Anyhow, I was as persuasive as I durst and he declared a climber would certainly not find a confederate

in the house. I suppose your brother is yet at Alderswath? I know he arrived, but that is all."

"Yes; I got a letter from Constance a few days since. Bob had advised, or ordered, Frank to stop. Frank's hand is rather distinctive and his mother or Mrs. Cameron, his sister, would know it if they saw the envelope. I don't know if it's important, but he is not my brother."

Hugh looked up in surprise. Anne smiled.

"Mrs. Aveling is not my mother; my father was twice married. But how did you get to know him? I admit I speculated about it, but durst not ask. In fact, when he brought you up through the garden I was *alarmed*. Perhaps I ought not to have been alarmed. After all, I had some grounds to reckon on your nerve."

"Thank you," said Hugh, and narrated his meeting Aveling.

"In a way, it was typical," Anne remarked in a thoughtful voice. "All fathers have some drawbacks, but, on the whole, mine is a dear. Sometimes I think he's bored. Anyhow, he talks at large to the shepherds and game-keepers. He declares their intelligence and manners are better than the intelligence and manners of some city gentlemen he knows. And if you contrast them with two or three friends of Mark's—— But you are not a shepherd."

"I am something of the sort," said Hugh. "Anyhow, I have a farm in Canada, and I hope you and Mr. Aveling agree."

"Oh, well, I like to weigh things, and one must not be carried away by first impressions. In rather awkward circumstances, you were coolly competent. Frank, of course, plunges. I expect you feel he rather jolted you off the beaten track, and wonder whether he'll entangle you in fresh escapades. However, it looks as if you were impatient to be off."

"I am not impatient; but if Mr. Aveling is on the terrace, he might wonder why I have not yet reached the stepping-stones."

"Yes," said Anne, "I'd sooner not try to baffle father. For a man, he's keen. Well, in two or three days I am going to visit with the Latimers and I believe you will be asked. That's all, Mr. Nicol. Good-bye!"

She vanished and Hugh started for the river. The hill on the other side was steep, but he went fast and his step was buoyant.

XI

BALHAM GETS TO WORK

THE road followed the water down the valley and Hugh let his bicycle go. He had stopped for some time at Thorshope and the wind that sweeps the Solway shore was now at his back. Hazels and mountain ashes grew in the hedge bank, and their naked branches rather blocked his views at the curves. On the hill he had noted a quarry, and at one side the road metal was ploughed up, as if a traction engine had broken the surface when the ground was soft. Here and there fresh stones had been put down but were not firmly rolled.

The uneven belt was on Hugh's side, and when he heard an engine throb he frowned. Although the road was fairly wide, a selfish driver might force him into the stones and ruts. He was going fast and the rusty bicycle's brakes were not good. A big open car swung round a bend, and squeezing his brakes, Hugh rang his bell. If the fellow pulled over a foot or two, he ought to get past without risking a fall in the rough stuff.

A horn hooted commandingly and the big car leaped up the hill. Hugh saw a twinkling silver monogram, shining glass, and a red-faced gentleman at the wheel. At the back, a chauffeur in uniform sat with folded arms. The driver looked straight in front. The crown of the road was his, he went fast, and he had warned the vulgar cyclist he was not going to move. Hugh knew him and was satisfied he did argue like that. The fellow had forced him to the edge of a hotel steps in France.

The blood leaped to Hugh's skin. His habit was not to look for trouble, but he sprang from stubborn stock and he hated the arrogant brute. Had he steered a coal lorry, for example, he'd have known his line. The bicycle, however, would crumple under the spinning wheels. All the same, he was not going to move much, and he did not, consciously.

Afterwards, he thought a wing touched his pedal. Anyhow, he felt the bicycle swerve and plunge into the stones the roadmenders had flung across a hole. Hugh took the hedge, his arms between the hazel stems and his face in the mossy bank. When he got up and looked for a useful stone the car had vanished and all he saw was rolling dust.

His head ached, torn cloth flapped about his leg, and a thin trickle of blood ran down his face. He had taken worse knocks, particularly in France, although he thought he had not hated Jerry as he hated Mark Gardiner. One was justified to hate a man who, without provocation, insolently flung another into the ditch, particularly when the other was oneself. Hugh tried for calm. The proper time to let oneself go was when one fronted one's antagonist, and after all he might—— He examined the bicycle, which did not seem much the worse, and getting up, by and by stopped at a lime-washed inn with an ancient sign, the *Salutation*.

A group on the cobblestones by the door surrounded a wounded dog. One knelt by a pan of hot water and twined a rag about the animal's blood-stained leg.

"She'll hirple a' her life, but I will not put her doon," he said. "I'd sooner use your gun on the fella' who ran over her."

"Ye're haverin'!" said another. "I wouldny say but

he'll loss some pairtridge eggs, and yin might drop some lime in a pool where the sea trouts lie."

"The consequence would be, he'd sack his game-keeper," Hugh remarked. "I don't know the fellow at Thorshope, but I expect you know his methods and a stranger might be worse."

One or two looked up. Hugh's face was scratched and stained by soil and his trouser leg was torn. It looked as if he were a fresh victim and a knowledgeable young fellow. A bit accident might happen anywhere, but Mr. Gardiner's driving was notorious, they said. He wouldny stop for a deaf old man or a toddling wean, and they had no mind to let a Glasgow merchant pit them aff their road. Hugh noted the *Mr. Gardiner*; had they acknowledged the fellow a Scottish gentleman they would have given him the friendly title, Thorshope. Hugh himself hated shabby bluff, which he imagined, in the end, let down the bluffer, and since he knew the Borderers, he thought Gardiner rash. It, however, had nothing to do with him, and when he went to the inn the sympathetic landlady supplied him with hot water, beer, and some safety-pins.

Since he had got a jolt, he stopped for a smoke, and before he reached the Border dusk began to fall. Near the Sark burn, a Dumfriesshire policeman ordered him to get down and inquired where his lamp was. Hugh admitted it was in a hedge some distance back, but when the other heard that he was knocked down by the Thorshope car he was reasonable. He said that between the Ministry of Agriculture and the English motorists, the county police had no longer time for their proper job, and when Hugh got on his bicycle he discreetly looked the other way.

The evening was clear, and soon the big sycamores and steadings at Beckfoot cut the sky. The oat stacks in the rickyard had melted, but one saw the stone circles that some had occupied, and the short row that yet stood were upright, smoothly thatched and symmetrical. At Beckfoot one did not prop up the stacks. Since the flagstones were heavy, the great barn's roof sagged in a gentle curve, but Hugh imagined the oak beams would carry their load for another hundred years. The courtyard he crossed was swept and clean, and running water splashed in an old stone trough. Lights shone behind the windows of the long white house under the sycamores; the smell of peat and burning wood was homelike, but in the iron shed by the byre a modern oil-engine throbbed.

All one saw indicated well-planned effort and firm control. Beckfoot was rather obviously the home of industrious, competent folk, and although the farm would not be his, Hugh was proud of his inheritance. He had some grounds for pride, for the younger sons, of his type, are perhaps the Old Country's best exports.

At supper he was given a note from Mrs. Latimer, who stated that she hoped he would visit with them for a few days. Hugh imagined that Harden wanted him; moreover, Miss Aveling had intimated that she would be at Alderswath. In the circumstances, he resolved to go.

He arrived in the afternoon, sooner than he had thought, for he found a motor bus started before a train for which he had expected to wait. Mrs. Latimer stated that Constance and Frank were on the hill and she herself was called to the vicarage, but Miss Aveling would be her deputy.

Hugh did not grumble. He had carried his small portmanteau some distance across country, and was satisfied to loaf by the fire, particularly since Anne Aveling oc-

cupied the chair across the rug. The old paneled room was restful; the dark polished table reflected a spirit kettle's flame, and hot cakes toasted on a brass stand in the hearth. He noted that Anne folded the greasy cakes with her small pink fingers, and when he used a knife she smiled.

"You mustn't bother to be polite, and I expect you drink whisky in Canada," she said.

"Not unless you can get a doctor's certificate. Some people think the golden days are gone," said Hugh. "On the plains, green tea, with condensed milk if you are extravagant, is the standard beverage. Anyhow, I would sooner you did not see me decorate myself with greasy crumbs and melted butter. Since I have not a girl's light touch, I durstn't copy you."

"We have some talents you have not. I do not claim they are remarkably useful," said Anne.

"All that's graceful is useful. For instance, a small quantity of tea in a delicate china cup is better than a quart splashed from a sooty kettle into a battered can. Then one values the ritual; the small, pink hand balancing the tea-pot, and the polite inquiry how much sugar—— In the Northwest, our feasts and manners are Homeric; Homer's pals were obviously a rough-neck gang."

"When they are not brown, my hands *are* pink," Anne remarked. "They ought, perhaps, like Constance's, to be white, but I wear gloves only when I am cold, and as you have perhaps noted, I'm not at all dignified. Constance's noble calm is as much hers as her skin, but when you haven't got it, to pretend is tiresome. For example, when you are properly annoyed! However, did you not meet Mark Gardiner in the Gretna road?"

Hugh laughed. "He drove me into the hedge, and I was perhaps improperly annoyed, because I could not

find a stone with which I might have smashed his wind screen. In polite circles, I suppose one does not throw stones at gentlemen one dislikes, but frontiersmen are primitive and Mr. Gardiner, so to speak, got my goat."

He narrated his adventure, and Anne nodded.

"Yes; Mark and all the Gardiners are like that. You mustn't get in their way. Well, if you don't mind pushing, I suppose you get where you want to go."

"Something depends on whom you push, and something on the steadiness of your nerve. A bluffer runs worse risks than other men, and if his pluck is pretended, sooner or later, I expect he's bound to crash."

Anne knitted her brows as if she pondered, and then gave Hugh a direct glance. Although he had but met her twice before he felt that Anne and he were friends.

"I see where you lead; I have thought about it much," she said. "If Mark's nerve broke in France, Frank's pubble—would be solved. However, I believe it did not break. Mark is not attractive, but I do not think anybody ever doubted his physical pluck."

Hugh reflected that Constance and Harden did not doubt, and Frank ought to know his relation. Anne, however, began to talk about something else.

"At Thorshope you saw my father. Some time since he was ill, and we were rather anxious. He went up the awkward spiral steps to the tower roof. Did you remark if he felt the effort? If he was breathless?"

"I did not," said Hugh. "All the same, he suggested that we might stop for a few minutes, and we leaned against the wall in the sun."

It looked as if Anne waited. He wondered whether she thought people with whom an invalid was all the time might not properly judge his progress and she wanted a stranger's opinion. Well, he must not alarm her.

"I thought Mr. Aveling tired; bored perhaps," he resumed. "I dare say it accounted for his showing me over the house."

"And that was all?"

Hugh pictured Aveling, leaning on his stick in the wood, and he saw Anne studied him.

"Honestly, I did not think Mr. Aveling ill. Tired was the proper word."

"Father is tired," said Anne. "Madam and the Camerons—Mrs. Cameron is Mark's sister—drag him about, but, as a rule, Thorshope is quiet and I believe he's happy there. At one time, the house was ours, but it is expensive and we are not rich. Besides, madam would sooner be in town. You know she is not my mother; my mother died in India, where father was a judge. I believe he was famous for his polo, but it's long since, and in India one soon grows old."

Hugh said nothing. He had studied Anne's stepmother, and he pictured the hard, ambitious woman using her husband to help her social advance. Anne implied that Aveling did not like his part; but weakened perhaps by his labors in the Indian heat and malaria, he might find cynical resignation easier than protest. Hugh thought Mrs. Aveling resolute, and since she had married a Scottish laird of good stock and an Indian judge, she had talents of a sort. For a minute or two Anne brooded; and then she turned to the window, and Hugh saw the hills melt in lead-colored clouds.

Gray mist rolled down the moors and trees tossed in the ghyll. The light got suddenly dim, and sleet and rain beat the streaming glass.

"Fellside weather!" Anne remarked. "I expect Frank and Constance saw the storm break on Skiddaw, and will soon be home."

By and by two figures sped across a footbridge and raced for the garden gate. A door shut noisily, Hugh heard coats being shaken in the hall, and the others came in. Harden's face was red, the lines Hugh had not long since noted were smoothing out and his loot was carelessly youthful. Constance's color was like a rose and melting snowflakes sparkled in her hair.

"Half an hour from Staneset Pike, and I beat Frank by fifty yards," she said.

"A month since, you might have beaten me by five hundred yards," Harden rejoined. "In another month, I expect I'd force a fell shepherd to use his best speed. However, since I'm modest, the credit is yours and Hugh's. You mustn't dispute about which cured me, but if you watch me get to work on the muffins and potato scones, you'll admit I am cured."

Constance went for fresh tea, and when Harden's appetite was satisfied he pulled out an envelope and some cigarettes.

"The cigarettes were bought from a grocer's van and are not first class, but since we must weigh Bob's remarks, to smoke might help," he said. "A strong man of the old type would not, of course, consult with girls, but I know one or two whose intelligence is almost as keen as mine. I don't know about Hugh. He does not rapidly see a joke, and his touch is not light, but when you give him his post he'll hold the fort like a Canadian soldier. Anyhow, he will not move for a double-barreled gun."

"I believe you wanted to talk about Bob's letter," Anne remarked.

"That is so. I suppose nobody at Mark's yet hopes I am alive?"

"Nobody, I think," Anne replied, and with a touch of

hesitation resumed: "But father was your friend, and, after all, your mother——"

"We will let it go," said Harden, frowning. "My relations have, no doubt, recovered from the knock, and to allow them to get another might not be kind. The time for my official resurrection is not yet. Very well; Bob, after consulting with his lawyer and the doctor I interviewed, is advised that for me to get a second certificate might be useful, and the doctor recommends a man at Edinburgh. Are you going, Hugh?"

Hugh agreed and Harden went on: "There's another thing. Balham looked up Bob; before the night club got notorious, Bob sometimes was there. He inquired discreetly if my relations were altogether satisfied I was drowned, and Bob stated that he understood all hope at length was gone. Balham then tried to find out who they were, and on Bob refusing to enlighten him, declared that he knew Captain Gardiner. Bob suggested that he might use a directory and had him shown out. Calling at Mark's office, he learned that Balham had inquired but Mark was not in town. His clerks do not inform strangers where he goes."

"Mark is at Glasgow and expects to stop for two or three weeks," said Anne. "To see what the fellow expects to get from him is hard."

"He told Bob he had recently lost his post and he thought Captain Gardiner might recommend him for another. It's plausible, because Bob states the police have shut up the club and seized a dope merchant who is supposed to have sent drugs there. Then Balham's a hardy scoundrel, and since he cannot expect to get fresh bribes from me, he has perhaps resolved to try my cousin."

"I imagine he will get a jolt," said Anne.

Harden laughed. "To picture Mark's being forced to pay in order to save my reputation is humorous, and if Balham can extort a small sum, he'll deserve it. A dead man, however, is done with, and Mark will, no doubt, be firm. In fact, unless Balham is remarkably cautious, he might go to jail and Mark will punish him for me. The joke is, whoever gets hurt, I win. For all that, after my resurrection, I hope to punish Sergeant Balham."

Hugh thought Constance's look disturbed; Anne's was frankly thoughtful, and he himself felt that Harden's humor jarred. To hear Mrs. Latimer's step in the passage was some relief and when she arrived they talked about something else.

XII

CORPORAL MULLINS SEES A GHOST

HUGH, crossing the viaduct by Carlisle station, stopped and stamped his feet on the pavement. A biting northeast wind swooped along the old city wall and tossed smoke and steam about the colored lights in the railway yards. Hugh turned his back to the gust and looked the other way. A half moon floated in an opening between the swift clouds, and behind the gasworks chimneys dim white hills cut the sky.

"Skiddaw forest," he remarked. "In Cumberland, spring is not genial, but I expect the snow is a foot deep in your Dumfries hills."

"Oh, well," said Harden, "the Scots are a hardy, and as a rule an active, lot. At nine o'clock in the morning the Edinburgh doctor will be ready for me; but when I ask for Bob at eleven o'clock the clerks are rather indignantly surprised. However, I want to see him, and if I satisfy the Edinburgh man, I'll run up to town. Will you be my guest?"

Hugh refused and inquired if Frank meant to stop for long.

"I think not. All I want is to consult with Bob. I cannot look up my pals, and if I met some at a play or revue, they might speculate about my object for pretending to be dead. I believe my object's good, but since it's not to be talked about, they might see another. In fact, until Frank Harden is exonerated, he is better dead, and when you start for Canada I am going with you."

Hugh nodded. To force one's friends to acknowledge one and to be scornfully tolerated where one was not long since a favorite was not an attractive part. Then wheels rolled in the station, smoke floated across the viaduct, and steam roared under the glass roof.

"The Glasgow train," he said. "Ours for Waverley is ten minutes later. Let's go back."

They went down the incline. The long train occupied most of the curving platform. Postmen tossed mailbags into the sorting vans, parcel trucks rattled, and passengers without hats walked up and down. The engine had gone, and the front coaches were beyond the roof, where the light was not good. Hugh steered for the fire in a waiting-room, but Harden seized his arm and pushed him behind a porter's truck.

Two men went by, a yard off. One had no hat and his light coat was open. He moved with a sort of rhythmic swing and Hugh noted his athletic figure and light step; he had known a bayonet instructor walk like that. The other was short and thickly built, but one knew him for a soldier.

"Balham!" said Harden. "The shorter man is Mullins. Watch where they go."

Mullins stopped to buy something at a sweetmeat trolley, and then hurried after his companion. Balham made for a coach behind the van at the front of the train and they got on board. A ticket inspector banged the door and a big locomotive rolled noisily backwards along the line.

"As soon as the couplings are fast the train will start," said Harden. "Balham is after Mark. Wait here. I'll risk something to give the swine a jolt."

Hugh tried to stop him, but he slipped round the truck, got in front of a porter and went swiftly along the platform's edge. Steam blew from the locomotive valve and

tossed in the biting wind about the front of the train. The first coach was a corridor coach, and the glass in a door was down. Harden jumped on the footboard and saw but one person in the compartment opposite. Behind him was a high, dark wall. He could look into the illuminated coach, but he imagined the man inside could not see him distinctly, and moving a foot or two along the step he beat on a window.

"Mullins!" he said in the commanding voice he had used on parade.

"Sir!" said the other and mechanically jumped up.

He stopped and gasped. The compartment door was open, and behind the glass across the corridor he thought he saw a face he knew.

"You drowned the wrong man," said Harden. "I did not call off B Company, and I'll haunt you for your lying tale."

A whistle blew and the locomotive's driving wheels hammered on the rails. Smoke and steam rolled by the windows and Mullins dropped slackly on the cushions. The face at the glass had vanished and blurred lights flitted past.

Harden rejoined Hugh and laughed, a queer, jarring laugh.

"The experiment worked. Mullins got his jolt and my control is pretty good, because I conquered the impulse to jump on board and knock out the brute. To know when you must wait is something. However, our train will soon arrive. Let's see if we can get a book."

They crossed the platform, and in the meantime the Glasgow train rolled along by the city wall. Balham, coming in from the corridor of the first coach, pushed back the middle compartment door, and, sitting down, looked at Mullins with annoyed surprise.

Mullins gazed straight in front. He had no hat and Balham noted the damp on his forehead and his slack pose. Mullins was strongly built; in France Balham had known him for a stout fellow, but since the war indulgence had shaken his nerve. In places, his skin was touched by yellow and his eyes were queer.

"What's the matter?" said Balham. "You were all right when we got down."

"There's not much good in telling you," Mullins rejoined. "The last drink I got was in the Euston Road, seven hours since, but I thought I saw Mr. Harden at the window."

Balham gave him a searching glance. Mullins was sober; he had no flask and when they stopped at Crewe he had not left the train.

"If you had got some dope, I'd have known," he said in a puzzled voice.

"You can't get it. Since the police dropped on Wen Li I haven't seen the stuff."

"I reckon there's the trouble," Balham remarked meaningly.

He himself did not use the drug. He knew the risk, and he knew the consequences of forced abstinence. Mullins looked up and although his eyelids drooped his voice was moodily obstinate.

"Mr. Harden's face was at the glass and sort of vanished in the smoke. Might have thought I was dreaming, but I *heard* him and I ought to know his p'rade ground voice. Anyhow, I got up with a click and answered, *Sir!*"

"The lad was a good drill," said Balham and studied the other thoughtfully. "He'd guts, too, and his letting down the company was queer. But go on. What did you think he said?"

"He had nothing to do with it. We had *drowned the*

wrong man, and he was going to haunt us. Something of the sort, and I wasn't dreaming. If I could get a softish job, I'd leave his folk alone."

Balham shook his head with scornful humor. At one time Mullins' nerve was as good as his and he did not think Tom consciously cheated. The explanation was, he had been forced to go without his dope.

"You always were a d— obstinate fool, and I s'pose you'll stick to all you've said," he remarked and pulled out a small flat bottle. "Anyhow, you can't get a job, and you're lucky you're not in jail. Take a drink and try to buck up."

Mullins swallowed as much liquor as the other allowed. Balham put back the bottle and gave him a cigarette.

"In about forty minutes we get down," he said. "So far as I can reckon, Gardiner's house is ten miles from the station where the fast trains stop."

"Some staff-work!" jeered Mullins. "If you weren't drunk or balmy, you'd have fixed on a slow train."

"Then hours from Euston! You wait at Crewe and two or three hours at Carlisle. When I'm steering you through an awkward job, I don't loaf about the pubs. Anyhow, they'll have a fire in the waiting-room, and in the morning we might get a motor bus."

Mullins grumbled, and stretching his legs on the cushions, shut his eyes. Wheels rolled, the locomotive snorted, and rail-joints clicked. Mullins did not know if he dreamed, but a voice seemed to pierce the noise:

"You drowned the wrong man!"

Once or twice he glanced stealthily at his companion. Balham, in the opposite corner, sat stiffly upright. His eyes were fixed on a picture of a Scottish watering place, but his look was inscrutable. If he but slept, Mullins

thought he might steal out at a station and get the first train to town.

At ten o'clock in the morning, Aveling smoked a cigarette by the fire in Mark Gardiner's office at Thorshope. At one time the house was his and he would have been happy to stop there, but he was not rich and his wife's social ambitions carried her to town. She declared there was no use in their living at Thorshope unless he could keep up the shooting and they could suitably entertain a house party now and then. The sort of friends she meant to cultivate would not visit at a hermitage. Aveling refused to dwell upon the consequences of his second marriage. When one got old one got philosophical, and the grounds for his dissatisfaction were rather romantic than material.

The combined office and library was the quietest room in the house and he could reckon on being left alone. Snow streaked the moors the window commanded and a bitter wind tossed the dead leaves in the dale. Aveling's doctor had warned him he must go quietly, and of late he had felt rather slack. Well, the new book about sport in India would occupy him until lunch, but he reflected that he would not again knock down a twisting snipe in the rice fields and watch from his tree platform for a stealthy tiger.

Yet his business in India had not been to shoot. For the most part, he had sweated in a stifling court, weighing the testimony of dark-skinned men whose code was not his code and whose subtlety sometimes baffled him. He had tried to be just, and as a rule, he thought he knew when he was cheated. For a time, a lie might conquer. For an Indian judge, he was perhaps an optimist, but, in the end, he believed a just man need not be afraid.

A servant tapped upon the door. Two men asked for Mr. Gardiner and when they were told he was not at home, inquired which of the late Mr. Harden's relations was at the house. Aveling was interested and ordered the servant to show the strangers up.

One was a rather handsome athletic fellow whose thick black hair was smooth with grease and whose clothes were good. His look was jaunty, for his carelessness was not thoroughbred, but Aveling sensed resolution and a touch of cunning. His companion was older and of a coarser type. One marked his queer dull eyes and a yellow tinge in his skin. Aveling knew something about stimulant, and narcotic, drugs, and he imagined the fellow had been in India but opium was not the stuff he used. Although the short man did not pretend to be cultivated, somehow Aveling thought him the cunninger of the two.

Balham saw a tall, thin gentleman, who glanced at him and waited with a sort of bored politeness. Well, in a few minutes he reckoned the old fellow would buck up and take notice. Balham had not before undertaken to surprise an Indian judge.

"I am informed Captain Gardiner is not at home, sir," he said. "You are perhaps the late Mr. Frank Harden's relation? When we knew him, he was lieutenant in——"

"I am his stepfather," said Aveling. "You might state who you are."

Balham told him, and naming his battalion and company, pulled some papers from his pocketbook to support his claim.

"Very well," said Aveling, and indicated chairs. "I do not yet know what you want."

"Mr. Harden was our officer. He was a good drill, but a competent sergeant can help a young lieutenant, and once or twice when things were ugly we saw him out. Mr.

Harden was keen, but I s'pose you know he sometimes got rattled?"

"I do not know, but you might go ahead. You imply that you are old soldiers?"

Balham looked up. Aveling's manner was careless, but Balham imagined he knew that old soldier is not altogether a flattering term.

"I was at Peshour, and Mullins was in the scrap with the Malakand. What I'm getting at is, we knew our job, and until Jerry smashed the battalion, we helped Mr. Harden with his. Believe me, he didn't forget it, and when he found us out in town he was generous. Once, when I was bothered for money, he gave me a hundred pounds."

"That's right, sir," said Mullins. "Twenty-five pound notes. I've got the numbers!"

Aveling saw where they led. The scoundrels advanced cautiously.

"Then I dare say you were well rewarded. Were you not satisfied?"

"Mr. Harden's promise was, if ever we were in trouble, all we'd got to do was to look him up. Now he's dead, we hoped his relations might do something for us. You see, not long since we lost our jobs."

"Why did you lose your jobs?"

Balham replied, frankly. The club, he said, was not worse than others and would presently reopen in a neighboring street, but because the police were officious, a different name would be used and fresh servants engaged. The servants were the real sufferers. A fine would not stop the boss, who would carry on as before.

Aveling wondered. The time might come when a Cromwellian home secretary would sweep the cities clean and men who thrive by vice would go to jail. The drawback

was, Puritans, for the most part, did not know where to stop, and Englishmen would not long endure a stern kill-joy's rule. In the meantime, however, he must not philosophize.

"Your luck might have been worse," he remarked. "I do not see what you expect from Mr. Gardiner."

Mullins said he thought an important gentleman like Captain Gardiner might get them a post. He was fond of the country and could drive a car; Balham, at one time, was mess-officer's clerk and had really superintended. He would make a good butler, and if the job they got was in Scotland, they would not mind.

Aveling noted the fellow's cunning. If they had, as they wanted him to imagine, power to support their claim, they knew he and Mark would much sooner they did not find an occupation in the Thorshope neighborhood. Mullins, in fact, gave him his cue.

"Your recent employment would not, I think, recommend you," he said dryly. "You have perhaps another plan?"

"Oh, well," said Balham, "we thought about emigrating. A ticket for Canada is not expensive, and if we could raise a small sum, to set us on our feet, I reckon we would never want to come back."

If they got the small sum, Aveling thought, they might refuse to start. The risk began when one began to bribe. So far, they had used implication. Now he must force them to state their claim.

"Did you really imagine we would supply the money you need?" he asked.

Balham hesitated. The tranquil, tired gentleman was keener than he had thought. Well, he must be as frank as possible.

"You are Mr. Harden's stepfather, sir. He knew what

he owed us, and he'd have seen us out. Sometimes you can best help a man by not telling all you know. Well, we knew why B Company went back the night the Germans broke our line. If I might move the books on the table, I'll show you——"

Using the table for a plan of the battleground, he indicated the position of the English, Canadian, and German troops. Although Aveling was not a soldier, he admitted the narrative was plausible and it, moreover, agreed with Mark's. Somebody whose nerve had broken ordered back the battered company, and now two men declared they knew the officer. The officer was the officer others suspected.

"In the dark, you heard a voice you knew," he said. "The Germans were throwing grenades; our men yet kept up rapid fire. Then you declare you *spotted* the officer who climbed the bank and signaled. The smoke of the grenades would hang about, and we know Very lights were not used. In the circumstances, your tale would not carry much weight. Then I do not think a man whose nerve had broken would climb *out of* the sunk lane.

"However, the important thing is, nobody would be much interested. My stepson is dead. To some extent, you are perhaps accountable, and if I find out that it is so, you must take your punishment. In fact, when you resolved to experiment on Mr. Gardiner you were very rash."

He got up and, ringing a bell, said to the servant: "Show these gentlemen out, and if they again arrive, at once tell Wilson to bring the car to the steps." He turned to Balham and resumed: "I dare say you can imagine where my messenger will go. That is all. Good morning."

Balham's face got red and Mullins' mouth was tight. For a moment they hesitated, and then they went.

XIII

THE MOORSIDE

FROM Edinburgh Harden went to London, and Hugh to Beckfoot farm. Mrs. Latimer had asked him to rejoin Frank at Alderswath, and one morning he started for a cattle auction at Cockermouth, which was not very far off. He was a Canadian farmer, and although his business was to grow wheat, he had begun to think mixed farming on English lines might pay. One could not for very long grow wheat on soil that rested only in summer fallow. Twenty bushels to the acre was a good crop; in England one got fifty bushels. He might experiment, and cattle that thrived in bleak Cumberland dales ought to front the winter in the Northwest.

In the afternoon when he climbed the long hill from the station on the plain, his reflections were not altogether economical, and sometimes his mouth curved in a crooked smile. At Alderswath he had come near forgetting he was not, like Frank, a gentleman at large. He must sweat for all he got, and when he was back in the Northwest and the shingles on his shiplap house cracked in the Arctic frost, he would picture by the red stove his kind hosts and the cultivated tranquillity he for a short time had known.

The trouble was, the picture might not vanish. Mrs. Latimer, Constance, and Anne Aveling might haunt him; he would think about them when he ought to think only about his job. Their proper background was the gracious calm that marked the old house where nobody sweated and

hustled. But, after all, he knew two or three cultivated gentlewomen, Canadian and English, on the plains, and their pluck was as good as the Pioneers'. Anyhow, they were not afraid to labor and one's husband's farm was a model farm. Well, Anne was stanch and fearless; Frank did not exaggerate when he called her a gallant little soul—Hugh frowned. In a few weeks he would be gone, and he mustn't be romantic. In fact, he mustn't be a fool. His mouth curved crookedly. He had resolved something like that before, when he first saw Constance Latimer.

Now, for all Constance's charm, he knew Anne moved him as Constance could not. Little Anne was not remarkably serene; she was keenly human, warm flesh and fiery blood. Hugh liked her flashes of imperious temper, her jolly laugh, and unconscious girlish pride. Hugh sternly braced up. When one thought about charming young women, comparisons were particularly invidious, and he'd soon be in Canada. Moreover, Harden talked about going with him. Well, Frank would find out that Canadian farming was not a humorous job.

He pulled out his watch. Four o'clock! The gleams of sunshine had faded and the afternoon got dark. Skiddaw had vanished behind gray clouds; across the valley, Grasmoor's flat top was indistinct. The wind had dropped, and one felt the chill damp that in a calm creeps down from the high fells. Hugh pictured the fire in the paneled room and Constance brewing tea. If Mrs. Latimer was not about, Anne would toast the cakes by the old-fashioned grate. Alderswath was four miles off and Hugh went faster.

When he arrived, Mrs. Latimer got up from a chair by the fire. She said the afternoon was turning cold, but she would send for tea and they would not wait for the others. Frank and Constance had started for a Roman camp.

Anne refused to join them, but by and by, when she had written a letter on which she was engaged, the sun shone for a few minutes, and she said she would go up the moor and meet the others coming back.

Hugh crossed the floor to the window. The flagstones on the garden path were dark and damp. The slender birches at the ghyllfoot had lost their sharp tracery, and their white trunks melted in the blurred rocks and trees. Farther up, the moorside was ominously dim.

"Can you find me a lady's mackintosh and a strap?" he said. "I think I'll go and look for Anne."

"Constance knows the ground and Frank is a good mountaineer. Will you not wait for some tea?"

"They do not know Anne changed her mind, and in consequence, they might come back by another line," said Hugh. "Anyhow, the moor is wide and broken. I feel I ought to start."

Mrs. Latimer gave him an interested glance. She thought him disturbed, and since he had not much grounds to be anxious for Frank and Constance, she wondered whether it was significant. At all events, he was resolved, and she gave him a mackintosh and let him go.

Strapping the coat on his back, Hugh took a field path by a noisy beck. The beck was not the stream that plunged down the ghyll; on the wet fellside becks are numerous. For a time the water brawled in the gloom of a thin wood. Then it crossed a rushy pasture, and Hugh climbed by slate steps a high loose wall.

Behind him, wet pastures, thin woods, and ploughed land went down the valley; in front, the dark moor rolled back to the sky. The rugged slopes, however, were pierced by a curving ravine. Winter floods had cut the peat, and one saw small black precipices. At some spots dead fern covered a smooth descent and tall rushes grew on the nar-

row flat between the bank and the water. Boulders blocked the channel and the beck splashed noisily across the obstacles.

Hugh steered obliquely away from the ravine. Forking tributaries, cut deep in the peat and springing from boggy well-holes, joined the main stream. At Alderswath one could see the camp, which looked rather like a small water-works embankment, on the broken summit, but now he climbed the moor breast, the flat patch was behind the skyline. Velvet-green and yellow moss marked treacherous spots; firm island hummocks helped him jump across greasy pools. On the Beckfoot marshes one sometimes plunged into a muddy creek, but his clothes were not a wildfowler's clothes and he imagined Mrs. Latimer's guests did not return from their excursions encrusted to the knees. All the same, he must not squander useful minutes by looking for the firmest ground.

By and by he found a sheep path and went up across brown heather, dead bent-grass, and stones that glimmered a queer dull white in belts of chocolate-colored peat. Glimmered was the word, because all began to get hazily indistinct.

Hugh's breath was labored and steamy exhalations floated about his head. He went as fast as possible; the camp was three miles from the village and before long dark would fall. Anne had very probably joined the others and gone back by another line to the wooded ghyll, but she might have missed them, and in the queer hazy light, a man or woman three or four hundred yards off would be indistinguishable. The annoying thing was, the moorside cut his view. The slope was not even, and each time he climbed a steep pitch and hoped he might see the summit, a fresh belt of brown heather rolled up in front.

At length, Hugh stopped for a moment. The flat patch

that cut the skyline was the camp, and he noted a sort of pinnacle, like a broken wall, a short distance to one side. Constance had talked about an old lead mine and the object was perhaps the ruined shaft-house. It, however, faded, thin mist floated down the hill, and Hugh ploughed through the tangled heather as fast as he could go.

Plunging into a dry ditch, he reached a green embankment four or five feet high. The front was even, and pierced at one spot by a clean-cut gap. Antiquarians might claim it the legions' gate, but the gap was probably cut for sheep long after they were gone. When Hugh climbed the bank, he could see across the enclosed square. Nobody was about, and when he shouted he got no reply. Anne had, no doubt, gone back another way.

He wondered whether the embankment had really guarded a Roman frontier post. Antiquaries began to doubt if only the legions' camps were square. They were not sure who dug the *Vallum* from Tyne to Solway, and to see why Hadrian built his famous wall was hard. An Emperor's blind lust of conquest? In all the desolate sweep of bog and moor there was nothing it was worth a cohort's lives to hold. In fact, until one reached the coal belt, only the grouse and black-faced sheep yet roamed the dreary Waste.

Hugh frowned. It had nothing to do with him and he but tried to persuade himself he was not anxious. Anyhow, time was going and the mist got thick. Although he did not think Anne was at the shaft-house, he must find out. Six hundred yards, straight in front, along the top of the ridge. Not much to bother a man who had steered his team home in a Canadian blizzard. Pushing off, he shouted, and sometimes whistled, as a shepherd whistles, his finger on his lips.

Twenty minutes afterwards, a faint shout pierced the

mist. The shout was not where he had thought to hear it, and he had gone back some distance when he saw a broken wall and a strip of tottering roof. His boots rattled on fallen stones, and a small light figure sprang from the gloom.

"Hugh!" said Anne. "Until I heard you whistle, I was beginning to be afraid."

Hugh took her hand; his impulse was to put his arm round her waist.

"We will get down all right. But why are you here? I really didn't think I'd find you, although I meant to search the ridge."

Anne gently pulled away her hand, but he sensed a sort of unwillingness, as if she were afraid to let him go. When she got to the camp, the others were gone, she said, and almost before she knew, the landmarks vanished. She could yet see the shaft-house, and in the chilly gloom, the broken walls were more homelike than the camp. Then heather and dead fern were stacked in a corner under the roof, as if a shepherd used the ruins. By and by somebody would come to look for her, and she could make a fire.

"Until the heap was ready for lighting, I forgot I had no match," she confessed. "I expect you think it typical?"

"Not at all," said Hugh. "However, dark will soon fall and we must push off. I believe I can find the head of the ravine; and then all we have got to do is to follow the beck."

"I hope that is all," said Anne, and resumed with a smile: "Do you know you are rather bracing? Frank declares your habit is to be where you are wanted. Still, your finding me was rather strange."

Hugh laughed. "My luck was good. Besides, when you know I knew where you had gone, the puzzle's solved."

"Oh, well," said Anne. "As soon as you did know I ex-

pect you started. The proper line was perhaps to wait for tea and send for a shepherd who knows the moor. It was not your line, Hugh. However, I suppose we ought to start."

They went downhill. Hugh hoped he took the proper slope, because he understood the other dropped to a valley down which a cart track went to a village four or five miles off. All the same, he was not sure. The cold mist was baffling and small drops that were rather damp than rain clogged his eyelashes. Anne took his hand, and when he sensed her confidence he thrilled; little Anne was willing for him to know she trusted him to see her out. Well, Alderswath was not far off, but sometimes mist baffled a fell shepherd.

After a time, Hugh stopped. The light was nearly gone. In the distance he heard a faint, throbbing noise.

"A goods train from the coast," he said. "If, as I think, the sound is on our right front, we are keeping the proper track."

"I thought it was on our left," Anne remarked.

The noise stopped, as if the train had steamed behind a hill. Hugh laughed.

"Then, there is not much use in guessing. Alderswath is somewhere below us. If one could hear a dog bark or a cart on the stony road——"

"When the cattle are in the byres, a farm village is the quietest spot I know," Anne replied. "But it gets cold, Hugh."

Hugh saw her boots were covered with moss and muddy peat; the mackintosh he had brought for her was getting dark. When he moved, drops fell from his rough coat, and his skin was wet. The damp turned to the searching rain Borderers call a *drow*.

Five minutes afterwards, he heard a faint musical

tinkle. Water running in the risp grass. He must follow the small channel, and it presently carried him to a steep bank. In front, so far as he could distinguish, a chasm curved down hill. Water splashed and gurgled in its depths.

"Now I think we are all right," he said. "We will get down and follow the beck. Boggy perhaps, but the tributaries are easiest crossed at the bottom."

Their descent was cautious, but the turf broke under Hugh's boot. Anne's hand slipped from his, but he thought she clutched his coat. Then the bank seemed to crumble, and they and blocks of peat and stones rolled down into the ghyll. When Hugh stopped, his legs were in the water and Anne was in his arms. It looked as if he had unconsciously seized her, and he remembered that she had tried to hold him back. Hugh smiled. Little Anne was stanch, but she could not for long have supported a load like that. In the meantime, she was in his arms, and when he awkwardly got up he did not let her go.

"You are not hurt, I hope," he gasped. "Some more bank might come down and we will cross the beck."

Anne's slim body was, for the most part, across his chest, her arm was round his neck. Somehow he knew she was not embarrassed, and anyhow, he must carry her to the boggy flat on the other side. After all, she weighed much less than the wheat sacks he had moved in Canada. The comparison was not romantic, but one must be practical, particularly when one balanced on wet, mossy stones. One rolled, and Hugh splashed through the pool. When he reached the other side he did not want to put Anne down, but she slipped from his arms.

Her mackintosh was smeared by peat, and he felt, for the first time, that his soft hat was flattened down on his

brows. Pulling it off he shook lumps of pasty soil from the crown. Ann studied him with a smile.

"It looks as if you did not know a yard of rotten turf fell on your head! But for you, I expect it would have dropped on mine."

"Oh, well, I might claim my head was better adapted to bear the knock. Then I have a hazy notion that when the bank broke you tried to hold me up."

"Sometimes I'm ridiculous," Anne remarked.

"You are a gallant little soul; the words, I might explain, are Frank's."

"The style is rather his than yours," Anne rejoined. "However, we must concentrate on getting home."

They ploughed across fallen peat and through tall rushes. Steep rotten banks shut them in, and where a tributary stream brawled down a chasm Hugh swung Anne across. The rain dripped from her soaked mackintosh and her boots sank in the bog. Hugh remarked that she did not grumble and where he went she followed pluckily.

By and by the pitch got sharper and the ghyll got narrower. Hugh, studying the flood-torn banks, doubted if he could climb out, and as far as he could see in front, the beck foamed across black ledges and plunged into pools.

"Since we cannot get up, we must shove straight down," he said. "I expect some of the pot-holes are deep, and as far as possible, I must put you on my shoulder. I really don't see another plan."

Anne did not. The beck was now a precipitous canyon and the beck occupied its narrow bottom.

"Very well, Hugh," she said. "I don't know if it will be altogether possible."

Hugh lifted her strongly. She heard him gasp, and

then, to some extent, she was on his shoulder. There was no use in trying to go cautiously, and she rather thought he plunged down the ghyll. Water splashed, stones rattled, and broken peat rolled into the stream. He lurched about, but he kept his feet, and when he stopped and Anne slipped from his arms the beck brawled across a wide belt of stones. Below the stones the banks rolled back, and Hugh noted an easy incline on which heather grew. Pulling a handful of the twigs and some long moss he soaked the stuff like a sponge.

"I reckon we are not far from the bottom of the hill and we will take the heather," he gasped. "Anyhow, there's not much use in carrying two or three pounds of peat, and if you put your foot on a stone, I'll remove a quantity."

"I will not. You are not my servant," said Anne.

"Then, I hope you will allow me to ask for the post."

"I rather thought Constance engaged you," Anne remarked.

"In a way that is so," Hugh agreed. "One likes to think one is useful, but I hoped we were pals, and a pal is entitled to help. Besides, one does not arrive at Mrs. Latimer's trailing clods of mud. You really are rather muddy, little Anne."

Anne turned her head, but she put her boot on the stone and Hugh washed off the peat. When he threw away the ball of moss, she laughed.

"After all, a girl hates to be dragged. But would you have carried Constance down the ghyll?"

"I think it's, so to speak, in my muscular power."

"But you doubt if you durst? Yet you did not hesitate to carry me!"

Hugh gave her a crooked smile.

"That is so, Miss Aveling. If I begin to explain, I might

get entangled. However, if you are much interested, I will risk it."

"One ought never to explain," said Anne. "At all events, you are a useful pal. And sometimes you are keener than one might think."

She stopped and looked about. At the top of the bank, a lantern glimmered, and then the beam of an electric torch searched the misty hollow.

"Hello, Anne!" said Constance Latimer. "Shout to the shepherd that we have found her, Frank. Wait a moment, Anne. We will help you up."

Anne gave Hugh her hand. "Hugh found me some time since, and he thinks the job is his."

XIV

AVELING'S EXPERIMENT

IN the morning Hugh waited with a touch of embarrassment for Anne's arrival. At the ghyll he had rather let himself go and Anne, at all events, had not rebuked him. He wondered whether she had since reflected and perhaps was sorry she had not been firmer. When she joined the group at breakfast she gave him a twinkling smile, as if she implied that their adventure was something of a joke. He felt he had got his cue and must try to play up discreetly.

Yet, for the two days he stopped at Mrs. Latimer's, Anne somehow was different. The difference was baffling. Although she bantered him as frankly as before, sometimes he sensed in her friendliness a vague reserve and sometimes a gentler vein. The queer thing was, he did note the difference, particularly since he imagined the others did not. His keenness was not remarkable, but he had begun to study little Anne.

Anyhow, he knew, and he reckoned Anne knew, the evening on the moor had marked how far their friendship had carried them. They, so to speak, had found out where they were, and Anne perhaps pondered whether she ought to allow a fresh advance. Sometimes she was firm, and Hugh doubted if he could persuade her. Moreover, he was not justified to try.

For a week he was occupied at Beckfoot; and then one morning a note from Aveling excited his surprise. Ave-

ling stated politely that Anne on her return from Mrs. Latimer's had informed him about her adventure in the mist. He would like to thank Mr. Nicol, and hoped he could conveniently come across for lunch on a day he fixed.

Hugh pondered the message. Aveling knew who he was; Hugh had told him, and he might not approve his knowing Anne. He had perhaps invited him to Thorshope in order to indicate discreetly the limits to their friendship, and so forth. Yet Hugh felt he must not exaggerate his importance. From the other's point of view, he was, no doubt, but a young fellow to whom Aveling was willing to talk when he was bored and dull, and who had, by chance, been able to help Anne in the mist. Moreover, he did not think Aveling the sort to claim the rights old-fashioned fathers at one time used. Anyhow, Hugh had no grounds to avoid the meeting, and on the day fixed he got on his brother's bicycle and took the road.

Anne received him at Thorshope. In fact, she met him frankly on the terrace steps, and somehow her humorous twinkle implied that she had guessed his doubts. Hugh, however, did not expect her to talk about it, and when they went up the steps her look got thoughtful.

"Father is not at all impulsive; he was an Indian judge," she said. "All the same, I rather think he likes you. I don't know if it's strange!"

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "you yourself were trustful."

"Sometimes I'm rash, but father is not," Anne rejoined. "The queer thing is, although I thought you might be usefully occupied at Beckfoot, he seemed to reckon on your coming across. Anyhow, you were kind to do so. I begin to think he really is not well, and now he cannot get about much and the others are gone, the house is dreary."

Aveling waited by a fire in the hall, and thanked Hugh

for looking up a disgruntled invalid. Lunch was served in a large and rather cold dining-room; and then Aveling said that since the afternoon was fine he and Hugh would go to the terrace for a smoke. In the corner behind the porch the sun was hot, and when a servant brought them coffee Aveling gave Hugh a cigarette, and pulled the rug in his long chair across his legs. Hugh noted that he moved slackly and thought his face was pinched. It looked as if the other remarked and understood his glance.

"For long I was in India and spring in the north is bleak, but I begin to find my relations' social activities in town rather strenuous," he said. "Thorshope, however, is restful and Mark is happy for me to use the house."

Hugh looked about. The curving river sparkled and the sun was on the woods. Larches, touched by luminous green, checkered the dark firs, and where the light pierced a beech wood the pale-colored trunks shone like silver. Primroses dotted a mossy bank, and the thorns by the waterside opened small fresh leaves.

"The dale is beautiful, and the house has a sort of austere charm," he said.

"It ought to have been my stepson's, but the fall in rents and the burden of taxation forced the trustees to sell. However, we must not begin to talk about political economy, and Anne tells me you met Frank Harden one rather eventful night in France."

"I did meet him, sir."

"You are satisfied about it? Since you know his friends, the Latimers, you perhaps know the suspicion that he stole away?"

"The suspicion is ridiculous, sir. If Harden had thought to save himself, he would not have gone, as he did go, towards the line where the Germans advanced."

"Did he tell you who he was?"

"He did not; we were both, in a manner, preoccupied," Hugh replied with a smile. "However, the Latimers have his portrait in uniform, the moon had pierced the clouds, and perhaps a Very light went up. At all events, I saw his face and I can picture his queer, resolute look. Then his voice was distinct. One knows when a man bears some strain, but one knows when he's not afraid. Harden was going back, where Fritz pushed on, to recall the other company. I will give you all the particulars I can recollect."

Aveling noted that his memory was good and his conclusions were logical. Nicol was not the sort to argue about a thing that could not be. A competent young fellow; Aveling pictured him efficiently handling the trench mortar he talked about. Then he noted his generous sympathy for another whom he thought unjustly blamed. When one weighed evidence, one studied the witness, and Aveling knew Nicol's conviction sincere. He thought it well founded, but the evidence would not satisfy a judge. For one thing, the time, which Nicol could not fix, was important. One might argue that Frank met him *after* B Company broke, and when he vanished in the dark, the other really did not know which way he went.

"Oh, well," said Aveling, "it is done with, and to some extent, forgotten. All who might have solved the puzzle are supposed to be dead."

He lighted a fresh cigarette and for a few moments pondered, his eyes fixed on the other's face. He thought him disturbed. The young fellow's honesty was obvious, and his tale was accurate, but it looked as if he kept something back. Aveling had imagined he might do so. In fact, he had for some time indulged a vague suspicion. Well, he must risk an experiment.

"At all events, the witnesses on whose good faith one

might reckon are dead," he resumed. "Two of another sort looked me up not long since. They wanted money."

"Balham and the corporal?" said Hugh. "We saw the swine at Carlisle——"

He stopped, in confusion, and Aveling smiled. The trick was an old trick. He had used surprise before.

"Then you know the fellows? I was a judge, Mr. Nicol, and when you undertook to exonerate Frank Harden you argued better than you thought. You rather obviously knew much that a Canadian soldier who had but seen my stepson for a few moments in the dark could not have known. Very well. The evidence that Frank was drowned left me some grounds to doubt. Now I hope you will tell me *where he is*."

Hugh's face got red, but he fronted the other squarely.

"Frank was a fool to trust me, but when I thought about the blackmailers I got mad. I'll risk stating that he is well and two doctors whose opinion carries some weight recently certified him normal; but until I have his permission, I will not tell you where he is, and if you try to find out, I'll do my best to baffle you. I believe his mind never was altogether unsound."

"Sometimes the line that divided neurosis from insanity is elusive," Aveling remarked. "You are a stanch champion, but I am not my stepson's antagonist."

"He declared you are a good sort, sir," said Hugh. "Perhaps it's not important, and I am, of course, a fool, but I'd like to know how you, so to speak, got on the proper track."

"The window-ledge in the tower was scratched, and at one or two spots it looked as if boots had scraped the wall. Your control was good, but when one has studied Hindue witnesses—— Then, although we agreed that a stranger could not get up, I imagined the exploit would

not baffle somebody who knew the proper holds, and I remembered that Frank had climbed to the window when he was a boy. Moreover, admitting the climber was Frank, I thought I knew what he wanted. If it's some comfort, I said nothing; now and then a discreet stepfather looks the other way. Well, I hope you are satisfied, but since you could not reckon on my inviting you to the house, I do not see why you came back."

"It was not, in any sense, to spy," said Hugh with embarrassment. "Until some time afterwards, Frank did not know I went."

Aveling studied him humorously.

"You would sooner not state your real object? Very well, we will let it go. Frank has, perhaps, talked about his plans?"

Hugh said Harden might go to the Northwest with him, and stated Frank's grounds for emigrating. Then they talked about the economics of Canadian farming, its advantages and drawbacks. Aveling saw Hugh reasoned shrewdly. The young fellow knew his job and was resolute. In fact, he imagined Hugh's qualities might carry him far.

"My stepson rather exaggerates," he said. "People forget, and the men who survived the fight are not numerous. Yet I don't know—— The friends Frank valued are justified to doubt him, and if he did make his mark, somebody might remember the awkward tale."

"He hopes to find the proper man, sir, and he can reckon on my support. My object's selfish, but I hope to find the man. Then I'd like to meet Sergeant Balham when Frank is not about."

Aveling smiled. He sensed a primitive vein in the young farmer, but Balham was a trained athlete, and he pictured the encounter. Then his look got thoughtful.

"Does not Frank think his mother ought to know?"

"He has not given me all his confidence, sir. The ground is awkward."

"I suppose that is so, particularly since Frank's mother is my wife," Aveling agreed. "Well, some candor is indicated, and I believe the boy resented her second marriage. In the circumstances, I did not use the control I ought perhaps to have used, and by and by I think Frank rather tolerated me. On the whole, his impulses were generous, but they were not directed and sometimes youth is rash."

For a few moments Aveling mused. There was no use in pretending. One must front life squarely, but he had not done so when he thought he married Mrs. Harden for his little daughter's sake. He had allowed her superficial charm to carry him away, and she had hoped the marriage might help her social ambitions. To imagine she would love his daughter was absurd; she had not loved her son, although when she saw he rather attracted the boy she was jealous. Well, he hoped he was philosophical. Where one sowed one must reap.

Anyhow, he and his lot were done with. In India the Sahib's day was gone; in England the new rich ruled. Yet the old stock was sound and fresh shoots sprang. Frank had some useful qualities, and if Anne and Nicol were good examples—— The young farmer was not altogether Anne's sort, but his folk were independent yeomen, and Aveling liked him better than he liked the Gardiners.

"In the meantime, I will keep your confidence, but you must talk to Frank about his mother, and I think he might have a worse counselor," he said. "However, I mustn't bore you, and Anne has come out to look for us."

He signaled, and when Anne advanced, said to her:

"I expect you are going to get a knock. Your accomplice has confessed."

Swift color touched Anne's face, and she glanced at Hugh, as if she were puzzled and annoyed. Then she turned to Aveling.

"For some time I have felt shabby, but the secret was not ours. In fact, I do not see why Hugh——"

"Mr. Nicol tried to be discreet. One mustn't boast, but for some time my business was to learn the truth where gentlemen perhaps more astute, and certainly less scrupulous, than he, were resolved to baffle me. Then, since I'm something of an expert, I surmised that you had made his acquaintance before you went to Mrs. Latimer's."

"That is so," said Anne. "There is no use in my trying to cheat you. I first met Hugh in the dark, in the hall gallery, where I held him up at the muzzle of a gun."

"Well, well," said Aveling, twinkling, "I believe I know why he was there. I am, of course, Victorian, and the rules young men and women use are not the rules I knew. In my time, one might restore a glove or a handkerchief a modest maid had dropped; but a gun—— However, the wind gets cold and I will go to the house. Mr. Nicol has promised to wait for tea at four o'clock and you perhaps can interest him."

He went off and Anne took Hugh to a terraced garden where the sun was on the wall.

"Although Father pretends to be old-fashioned, he's remarkably keen, and he never lets one down," she said. "I am really happier because he has found out. But sometimes I'm anxious. He's horribly thin and often languid. The others bore him, and he's lonely. He might ask you to come across another time."

"Mr. Aveling was long in India and our spring is bleak. When the cold winds drop he'll brace up," said Hugh. "I cannot imagine my society has much attraction."

"He likes you, and I'm frankly rather glad," said Anne.

"Father and I and Frank were always pals; before the war we were a sort of defensive combine. Now, in a way, Frank is gone——"

She stopped and Hugh saw something like fear in her brooding glance.

"Summer is coming and Mr. Aveling's infirmity will go. I hope I'm allowed to join the combine."

"Oh, yes," said Anne. "You have not father's keenness, but you're stanch. I suppose I ought to use some reserve, but I'm not going to. Father and I and you and Frank are one sort; the Gardiners are another, and although we are laboriously polite, we clash. But let's talk about something else. On a spring afternoon one mustn't brood."

Hugh said nothing. Where his help was useful Anne knew it was hers. They went down across the sunny grass to the waterside where fresh primroses dotted the mossy bank.

XV

ANNE FRONTS A PLUNGE

AFTER tea Anne and Aveling went with Hugh to the terrace steps. Aveling said he hoped he would soon come back, and Hugh got on his bicycle. He was again at Thorshope, but he did not see his host.

In the morning he started for Mrs. Latimer's, and when he told Frank about his excursion Constance joined them.

"Mr. Aveling is your friend. I believe you can trust him not to enlighten your relations, but he stipulates that your mother must know," said Hugh.

Harden frowned and knitted his brows, but after a moment or two he looked up with a dry smile.

"I imagine Balham and his pal did not bully my step-father and they will leave the old fellow alone another time. Now I suppose they are after Mark, and on the whole, I wish them luck."

Constance stopped him. "Mr. Aveling is right, Frank. Your mother ought to know."

"Let's be honest. Do you think she would be happier?"

"I do not know," said Constance. "She is your mother, but I try to persuade you rather for your sake than hers. She is entitled to see you, and you would be happier to know you did not refuse because you were afraid you might again be hurt. After all, one must play the game."

So far as Hugh could remember, Constance had not used a phrase like that before; but he thought it pertinent.

"Very well," said Harden. "Since you would not give another a job you yourself would refuse, you're entitled to be firm. I'll give you a letter for Aveling, asking him to fix a meeting before I sail. It must, I suppose, be soon. When do we start, Hugh?"

Hugh saw Frank wanted to talk about something else, and he gave Constance an apologetic glance.

"We ought to be off in about three weeks, by direct boat to Montreal. When the ice breaks on the St. Lawrence the prairie soil is soft. I suppose you are still resolved to go?"

"You engaged to take me."

"The Northwest is not a *gentleman* farmer's paradise. Winter is hard, summer is short, and when the frost leaves the ground the man who hopes to make good must strain and sweat until the snow comes back. At harvest I have worn out two teams in the hard day, and where you use a tractor the stooking gang must keep the machine's speed. Then if you locate in the back blocks where land is cheap, you must live much as we lived in France. Where you burn cordwood and carry water from a well, you don't bother about a bath. The bill-of-fare for breakfast, dinner, and supper, is bacon, potatoes, desiccated apples, and sometimes California prunes."

"And so forth, and then some!" said Harden with a laugh. "The drawbacks look numerous, but they rather obviously have not knocked you out, and perhaps the strange thing is, I'm not much daunted. Then, if I was daunted, I durstn't hesitate. So long as it looks as if I broke in France, I must front all risks that others front. In short, I'm going!"

Constance turned and gave Hugh a smile.

"We will not make you accountable. Frank and I have talked about it. I think he ought to go."

Hugh said nothing, but on the whole he agreed. For all Constance Latimer's fastidiousness, one sensed a Spartan vein. For Frank's sake, she would let him go; she perhaps thought stern industry would mold him better than her watchful tenderness. Her pride was high, and to have a lover for whom she must apologize would hurt.

For two weeks Hugh occupied himself at Beckfoot farm. Mechanical labor did not banish disturbing thought but it steadied him. He must soon start for Canada, and since he knew Anne Aveling he did not want to go. Yet, because he was unwilling, he, like Harden, dared not hesitate.

In England, all he might hope to be was a bailiff on a rich man's farm; a servant's post, and a servant's pay, but he had qualities that, in Canada, might carry him ahead. Then he was not Miss Aveling's sort. Her proper home was a home like Thorshope; for some time, his would be a shiplap shack. She was satisfied with him for a pal, but he had no grounds to think she wanted him for a lover. Well, on the high Northwest plains the gumbo soil would soon get soft, and after studying the steamship time-tables he fixed his boat.

Then he one morning picked up a bi-weekly Dumfries newspaper and got something of a shock, for an obituary notice occupied the top of a column. Aveling was dead; a servant had found him in the library, his head on the table and his broken fountain pen on the floor. The newspaper narrated his career, and stated the arrangements for the funeral, on the day before Hugh saw the paragraph. He thought about Anne and was moved to pity; he must tell her he was sorry, but perhaps he ought not yet to disturb her.

In the afternoon Harden arrived.

"I expect you have got the news?" he said. "Aveling

was kind, and to remember I was not at his funeral will hurt."

Hugh inquired if Aveling's death would interfere with the other's plans. Harden brooded for a moment or two.

"No," he said. "If I thought my mother needed me, I'd stop; but I do not—I got a note this morning; a short, businesslike note. Aveling had told her—she did not state when—and she agrees that for me to see her at Thorshope might not be desirable. She must consult with a lawyer at Edinburgh and she fixes a meeting at her hotel. In the circumstances, you can buy the steamship tickets; but since I must get the Edinburgh express at Carlisle in the morning, I hope you will put me up for the night."

"Of course," said Hugh. "Will Anne stop with Mrs. Aveling?"

"I don't know, and I'm frankly bothered. In a way, she's alone; Anne had not much to do with the Gardiner lot. Then she's not rich. Aveling had not much money, and I expect his pension stops. My mother is not rich; at Edinburgh I must find out, because I have yet some part of my inheritance. But I'm horribly sorry for Anne, and don't see where I can help. I cannot carry her off to Canada; she is not really my relation, and I cannot go to Thorshope and look her up."

"In the morning I am going to Thorshope," said Hugh in a quiet voice.

Harden studied him for a moment or two, and smiled.

"By George, the plan's as good as another! If you had a house—— But a house can, of course, be built, and so far as my mother's claims allow, I'll be glad to help. I cannot, however, engage for Anne."

"When I marry, I'll undertake to support my wife. In the meantime, I have no house. I have not your stepsis-

ter's cultivation, and some other advantages her husband ought to have. In fact, I'm not a damfool, Frank!"

Harden's eyes twinkled, but he began to talk about something else.

In the morning Hugh went to Thorshope and soon after he was shown into the hall Anne came down the stairs. In her black clothes she looked very small and light. Her skin was paler than before, and Hugh knew she had got a cruel knock. Yet when she gave him her hand she smiled.

"I suppose you do not want to see the others?" she said. "Mark, Frank's sister, Mrs. Cameron, and her husband are here. Mrs. Aveling is at Edinburgh."

Hugh said he had seen Frank, and he wanted Anne to know he was sorry. The afternoon was dark and cold, and she signed him to an oak bench behind a carved screen by the fireplace where a beechlog burned.

"Do you know I rather expected you?" she said by and by. "Since you are Frank's champion, Thorshope is something like the enemy's castle. All the same, you risked a visit twice before."

"If you were willing, I'd be glad to risk it another time, but it must be soon," said Hugh in a quiet voice. "In sixteen days Frank and I sail for Montreal."

Anne gave him a startled glance. He thought her skin got whiter and her small hands trembled.

"I knew you must go, and so long as I had Father—— But I durst not talk about him; he was all I had. Then, until the time was fixed, I refused to think that it got short. When you both are gone I'll be horribly lonely."

Her body went slack, and with a spread hand she shielded her bent head from the fire. For a moment she was but a forlorn child. Hugh fought for control.

"If I could stop——" he said. "But I am not, like Frank, independent, and in England I'd be as far from

you as in Western Canada. A foreman on somebody's farm, perhaps at the other end of the country, would not be a useful friend, and I do not even know if I could get a foreman's post."

Anne looked up and saw his knitted brows and strained expression.

"Yes," she said, "in Canada you might be independent and I mustn't be selfish, but Father is gone, Frank is going, and when you are altogether alone to be brave is hard. I think Mrs. Aveling hated me from the beginning; although she did not love Father, she is jealous. She and Mrs. Cameron and Mark are a horribly strong, unscrupulous combine, and I'm afraid. If I were Frank's sister, I'd steal away with him and you."

Hugh's heart beat, but he shook his head.

"You mustn't be foolish, little Anne. The Northwest is a hard country; winter's arctic, summer is hot, and on a prairie farm one must go without the comforts and refinements people in England think one must have. So long as the soil is not frozen, one but works and sleeps, and sometimes does not stop for food. At Montreal and Toronto, when winter comes, there are toboggan runs, ice-boats, and covered skating rinks. On the plains, when we are not hauling cordwood, we shiver by the stove."

"But there are some women in the Northwest. I suppose they do not all die long before they ought?"

Hugh smiled. If he had, to some extent, exaggerated, his object was good. In fact, when he undertook to be devil's advocate he argued against himself.

"No. Labor and frugality are not as dangerous as some people think. On the whole, I believe the women I knew were happy, but I'm not going to pretend they didn't need all the pluck they'd got."

A touch of color came to Anne's skin and her eyes

sparkled. With her thin shoe, she recklessly but firmly pushed a glowing log farther into the grate. Hugh knew her swift imperious moods. It looked as if he had roused her from her depression and that was something.

"You tried to be noble, and I hope it was hard," she said. "Have you very much ground to think me frightened by the sort of things other women front? But you perhaps imagine only you and Frank like adventure. I am little Anne; I must be protected and carefully kept from harm. Largeness has nothing to do with courage. You did not get your medal because you were big, and sometimes it looks as if you were not remarkably intelligent. Well, I am not afraid of imaginary hardships in Canada, but I am afraid of the Gardiners, and I am not going to help their ambitious schemes by marrying some rich stock-jobbing friend of Mark's."

Hugh had mechanically got up, and he touched her.

"Steady, Anne! Nobody must be allowed to bully you. I am not important, but if I knew where I could help, I'd engage to see you out."

"Very well," said Anne, and although she blushed like a rose, she fronted him squarely. "Since you are strangely dull or remarkably modest, you might, for example, take me to Montreal."

"You would risk the plunge?" said Hugh, as if he dared not believe he properly understood.

"Unless you are afraid," said Anne. "You rather force me to be shameless, but I'd go across the world with you."

Hugh took her in his arms, but by and by she pushed him back. For all Anne's romantic impulsiveness, she was marked by a practical vein.

"Our luck in being left alone so long was rather good, and we must weigh our plans," she said. "One hates to cheat, and since the Gardiners will certainly not approve,

I mustn't take their hospitality. Besides, they would try to stop the wedding."

"I'll carry you off to Beckfoot, or, if you like, to Mrs. Latimer's. I imagine one can be married in sixteen days, but we might go by a later boat."

"Mrs. Latimer's, I think," said Anne. "I'll start in the morning; to get away will be easier when madam is not about. Afterwards, of course, I must visit at your farm, but I will go alone to Alderswath."

She stopped and signed Hugh to be quiet. A door handle rattled and two people came in. The fashionable lady was Frank's sister; Hugh had seen her before, on the terrace, and although the glance she gave him and Anne was careless, he thought her interested. Gardiner's loose, thick shooting coat and knickerbockers perhaps exaggerated his bulk, but he was fatter than the infantry captain Hugh had met in France. Hugh knew his rather aggressive, dominant look. Mark Gardiner had the sort of qualities that carry one through a crowd, but he was not at all a Scottish laird.

Anne presented Hugh, and suspecting the others' curiosity, he said:

"Mr. Aveling twice received me here, and I ventured to ask for Miss Aveling, whom I met at Mrs. Latimer's."

"Oh, quite," said Gardiner. "Will you stop for tea?"

Hugh refused politely, and the other studied him.

"Have I not met you before?"

"In the road, one afternoon some time since. I believe you hurt a dog."

"Oh, yes," said Gardiner. "You were the cyclist? My man saw you get up, so we did not stop. But I myself only saw a man on a bicycle. Was there not another time?"

"At the *auberge Toison d'Or*, behind the line. I was with the Canadians on your battalion's left."

Gardiner, perhaps unconsciously, frowned.

"I remember! You came up the steps? Well, the fight soon afterwards, cost our lot much. However, I want a drink. Will you join me?"

Hugh said he must go. Anne gave him her hand with a warning glance and he went off.

XVI

ANNE'S CONQUEST

ANNE went to Alderswath, and as soon as Hugh got a note from Constance he took the road. He thought Anne's engagement had surprised Mrs. Latimer; in fact, he wondered whether she was not jarred, but he had not expected her to approve. From her point of view, the plunge Anne had resolved to take was, no doubt, altogether rash, and to some extent Hugh himself agreed. His business was to see Anne had as few grounds as possible to regret her trustfulness.

So far as he could distinguish, she had not begun to do so, and but for the knock she had recently got he might have thought her happy. He noted that she had qualities he had not hitherto suspected. Little Anne looked coolly in front and refused to be daunted; she acknowledged him her lover with a sort of possessive calm, and her frankness sometimes moved him to humorous surprise.

There was, she declared, no use in pretending, and when he seized her in the gallery at Mark's he really risked getting shot. Nobody who was not her relation had yet embraced her. All the same, he, in a way, was forced, and the control and gentleness he had used were perhaps remarkable. She had begun to think that if she married she would sooner marry a man like that, and closer study had rather supported than shaken the judgment she had formed.

Hugh laughed and kissed her.

"Since my drawbacks did not tip the beam, I'm lucky," he said. "It does not look as if you had weighed my circumstances."

"They are not really important," Anne rejoined in a thoughtful voice. "One can get money, although I suppose it's hard, and after all, the things that are worth most do not cost much. But I doubt if one can remodel one's husband, and to feel one must try would be humiliating. Besides, he might resent the experiment."

"You are a charming, but shrewd, philosopher," said Hugh. "One likes you for your fastidiousness, but sometimes to look the other way is a useful plan. However, d'you think Mrs. Aveling and Gardiner will speculate about your visit?"

"On the whole, I think not," said Anne. "When they find out why I went I expect they will get a jolt. They will, of course, not know they're ridiculous. People like the Gardiners are fools."

Hugh's talk with Mrs. Latimer rather embarrassed him. Her school was the old school, and he saw she was afraid Mrs. Aveling might think her his confederate. For all that, she was kind, and she and Anne agreed that the wedding should be at Alderswath.

Constance was sympathetic and, she stated, not at all surprised. Harden had got back and declared his satisfaction.

"For you to marry Anne is a first-class scheme, and I mustn't pretend I do not see its advantages," he said. "For one thing, it solves the puzzle, what ought we to do with her. It will annoy the Gardiner gang, and it sets me free to concentrate on my new job."

"I doubt if the desirable objects were altogether Hugh's," Anne remarked.

"Oh, well, when you help another, I do not see why you

should not help yourself. The important thing **is, our combine stands.**"

"Did you see Mrs. Aveling?" Hugh inquired.

Harden frowned and his look got stern.

"For an hour at an Edinburgh hotel. My mother had engagements with the lawyers and some friends. Since Aveling had informed her, we were able to avoid much emotional strain, and I believe for her to know the rest-home had cured me was some relief. She, however, would not take the help I offered, and I imagine her interview with Aveling's lawyers was satisfactory. Then we agreed that we would not yet tell the world about my resurrection. That was all. I don't know if it's much comfort, but I tried to play the game."

Hugh saw Harden felt his mother had not. After all he was young and her coldness, no doubt, had hurt. For a few moments he brooded; and then resumed:

"Since you engaged to take me for your farm pupil I have looked up the map. The Peace River is at the far back-end, and I imagine when you get there you have got to stop. Well, I might not want to stop for good, and now you are marrying Anne, to be near the trunk railroads and settlements might be some advantage. Land, you state, is dearer in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, **but** I ought to pay for my apprenticeship, and if you can use a larger sum than you have got, I'd be happy to speculate."

"You are generous," said Hugh. "Wheat is still a risky crop and you might lose your money. However, I might experiment with some cattle, and we will perhaps talk about it again."

Constance and Harden presently went off, and Hugh said to Anne:

"My father hopes you will visit with us for a few days."

"Of course," said Anne. "I ought to know my husband's relations. But why were you apologetic? Did you think I would refuse?"

"I wanted you to go. I felt you ought to see my home and the folk to whom I belong."

"Quite," said Anne. "There's your yeoman's pride! But you perhaps thought I might feel their object was to study me, and I would not like to be criticized. Well, your father is entitled to know something about the girl you are going to marry, and if he is at all like you, I believe I can conquer him. You can fix the day. Unless, of course, you are ashamed for me."

Hugh smiled and said nothing. Anne's habit was to see the proper line, and he began to know her moods. He already knew her pluck.

Anne went to Beckfoot. In the tranquil, cold evening, she saw a long white house at the bottom of a grassy hill. Big sycamores stretched their branches across the low flagged roof and opened pointed buds. Then the car rolled into a courtyard and she heard water gurgle in an old stone trough at which two large horses drank. Somehow she felt the house was friendly.

Hugh stopped to pull out her luggage and Anne got down. A tall old man waited at a door. His skin was wrinkled and darkened by biting wind; his figure was powerful, and Anne pictured him turning the plough at the headland with a smooth and easy swing. She imagined Nicol of Beckfoot was not yet satisfied to superintend. His clothes, however, were good and he was marked by a sort of dignity and command. By the horses, she saw a younger and taller man, like Hugh. She advanced alone and gave Nicol her hand. She noted that his was large and firm and his glance was kind.

"I am Anne. You are, of course, Hugh's father—— I have lost mine," she said.

Nicol bent his head and kissed her—he was forced to bend—and they went into the house. Hugh, looking up, admitted a touch of humorous surprise. He had not thought to see his father captured quite as soon. In the big flagged kitchen, Nicol beckoned the younger man who had followed them to the room, but Anne did not wait.

"You are Jim. I have really known you for some time. Then you are ridiculously like Hugh."

"I'm longer," said Jim with a twinkle. "It looks as if Hugh was luckier; but although we're rather hefty than ornamental, he cannot carry three portmanteaux."

He went off to help his brother, and Nicol, his hand on her arm, led Anne forward to his white-haired house-keeper. Two dairymaids waited. Their clothes were fresh, and she imagined were put on for her reception; she knew them keenly interested and she knew the patriarchal customs that linger about the homesteads of the North. Nicol's servants were members of his household and entitled to some part in welcoming an important guest. She gave the girls a frank smile.

The Nicols received her in their kitchen. They used the rules they long had used and she acknowledged them right. At a Cumberland farm the front door is opened only for weddings and funerals, and she was not yet a bride. Moreover, they indicated that she was now one of themselves.

Anne was at Beckfoot for five or six days, and on the evening before she went, when the wedding was near, she said to Hugh:

"I am going for a night to Thorshope. You will come for me?"

"If you are resolved," said Hugh. "Still, I'd sooner

you didn't go. So long as you are with us or Mrs. Latimer, I feel you are safe. Then the visit will be a strain."

"For a short time one can bear a strain," Anne rejoined. "I do not want to go, but I have felt I was shabby when I stole away. When you allow yourself to be afraid you are shabby. Mrs. Aveling is not scrupulous, and she had some ambitious plans for me. Mark and the Camerons seconded her, but now all is fixed, they cannot meddle. Anyhow, they mustn't think I am ashamed. Besides I will know you'll soon arrive to carry me off."

Hugh saw he could not persuade her, and although he thought the visit rash, he liked her pride. In the morning they started for Alderswath. Hugh got back in the evening, and after supper Nicol lighted his pipe and asked him to wait.

"You have got a kind and bonny lass, but her folk are gentlefolk," he said. "Do you reckon you can support her properly?"

Hugh admitted it had bothered him. He, however, thought Aveling had not been extravagant and Mrs. Aveling had not indulged her stepdaughter. Then he had sold his farm for a good price, and when he bought another he hoped Anne would not be forced to use very stern economy, although they must be frugal.

"Then, you did not know she had some money?" Nicol remarked and stated the sum.

Hugh gave him a surprised glance. Anne's fortune was not large. In England the interest would perhaps but supply her with fashionable clothes; but in Canada the capital, if wisely used, might help one to prosperity on a prairie farm.

"I did not know. Aveling's pension would stop, and Frank declared he was not rich. But did Anne talk to you about things like that?"

"Why should she not? The lass is cleverer than you think, and the money was her mother's," Nicol rejoined. "Now if you will tell us how much you have at the Canadian bank——"

Hugh did so. He, however, said he had got his portion, which he had not squandered, and it was all to which he was entitled. He must not rob his brother. Jim smiled, and Nicol resumed:

"Jim takes Beckfoot, and it will be long before you have a farm like his. A bachelor can be independent, but you are marrying a gentlewoman and must think for your wife. There's another thing: If her relations could, they'd stop the marriage, and you mustn't give them ground to claim you wanted her fortune. Very well. Jim and I have talked about it, and for all she brings you, you must have an equal sum. Since you have not as much, I will supply the difference. After all, it is but just. For every pound Anne has got, we put down another. Her folk can tie hers up by settlement if they like."

Hugh was moved. His father and brother were generous, but he knew their pride. The Nicols did not take favors, and they paid their debts; debts of honor and other sorts. They were north country yeomen. Well, pride like theirs was good, and Hugh admitted it was his, but it did not account for all. Little Anne had captured the old man. The visit from which he had thought she might shrink in a sense was her triumph. Then Jim, noting that Hugh was quiet, gave him a friendly nod.

"As soon as I heard father's plan, I agreed. It is but just," he said.

Hugh's thanks were embarrassed but sincere. For Anne's sake, he dared not refuse the others' gift, and when they went off he climbed the hill behind the house and looked across the sweeping shore flats to Skiddaw's

misty top. Where the foothills rolled down to the plain he marked the long ridge at Alderswath. For two days, he need not be disturbed about Anne, but she was then going to Thorshope. In a sense, she ought to go. Anne was not ashamed of her marriage, and although it might cost her something, she meant to use the proper rules. Well, in three days, he was going to Thorshope, and for all the Gardiner clan might do, he'd carry off his bride.

XVII

HUGH CLAIMS HIS BRIDE

A NOTE from Anne informed Hugh that she started for Thorshope and fixed the time when he must call for her. He imagined the excursion would cost her something, and when it was over he would be happier. Then he himself must front her antagonistic relations, and for all his father's gift, to satisfy them about his ability to support his wife might be hard. The Gardiners' views and his about the things one, on the whole, could advantageously go without might not harmonize. Anyhow, he must admit Anne might have got, and perhaps ought to have got, a richer husband.

His part was not at all a triumphant part, but he and Anne agreed that one must, as far as possible, play the game, and when his brother declared he was going with him he did not refuse. James Nicol was six feet and one or two inches, and Hugh had seen him carry four-bushel sacks of oats up some awkward steps. Good oats weigh about fifty-five pounds to the Imperial bushel. He had won some cups for Cumberland wrestling, and although as a rule he was humorously serene, none who know his qualities forced long Jim to dispute.

Hugh had thought to engage a car at Carlisle, but Jim knew a better plan. Since they could get one for nothing, there was, he remarked, no use in paying three or four pounds, and Hugh admitted he was logical. A Cumbrian does not squander money, and in the Canadian wheat belt

nobody is extravagant. In fact, Hugh imagined the Pioneers' stern frugality carried them as far as their industry.

Sometimes, Jim explained, they loaned their neighbor, Forsyth, a plough team and crushed his oats with their oil-engine mill. In consequence, they were entitled to use his car, and Jim had done so. Hugh inquired if he could drive, and Jim replied modestly that something depended on the traffic, but his luck, so far, was good.

When the car arrived, Hugh pulled out his watch and frowned. If he sent for another car, he could not reach Thorshope at the time Anne had fixed. Forsyth's car had obviously carried yellow cottonseed meal, and he imagined poultry crates had not long since occupied the back. He knew the outline, but the color puzzled him. Well, on proper occasion, Jim was generous, and now he had but followed his economical bent.

"I am not a motorist, but I have seen cars like that in Canada," Hugh remarked. "Still you perhaps know Henry's joke that you can have any color you like, so long as it is black? This example's apple green."

"She got singed when the hay mow burned, and a beam fell on her; you can see the marks," said Jim. "Forsyth had her painted green, but a car's like a cow. A man who knows can spot her pedigree."

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "we cannot now get another car, but we can get a brush, and Jane might have something useful in her housemaid's box."

For a time they and the girl were occupied, and then Hugh got in the car. The engine rattled savagely, the car leaped through the courtyard arch and rocked along the wheel-torn lonning. A lurch at the gate-post threw Hugh against the door, and trailing a long dust cloud, they took the road across the Solway flats.

"She's hard in the mouth," said Jim. "I am not a first-class driver, and we were twenty minutes cleaning up."

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "so long as nothing gets in front—— But do you expect you'll need the stick?"

He indicated a thick ash pole with a sort of spear head at the end. Jim laughed, and quoted the Cumbrian motto:

"Thoo niver knows. The stick was my otter pole: I cut off the end I broke when I went into the dub at Lineside rocks. If her relations reckon they can stop the lile lass, somebody will get hurt."

Hugh shrugged, and stooping behind the screen, lighted a cigarette. Jim was a stout fellow and in anything like a rough-house would be a useful man, but his methods were out of date, and Anne would be justified to think they might have got a better car. In fact, Hugh began to feel his romantic adventures were marked by a humorous vein. For example, when he went to carry off his bride he used a singed and repainted Ford, and her other champion was ready to use an otter pole.

Yet he, like Jim, was an English Borderer, and to some extent primitive. Anne was cultivated, but for a time at all events, she must live the frugal life he had hitherto been content to live. Because she was thoroughbred, she would not grumble, and if she were about when the battered car rolled noisily up to Thorshope, he thought she would see the joke. Where he might storm he reckoned Anne would smile, and if to smile was hard he would not know.

At Gretna a dog that escaped by a hairsbreadth pursued them savagely, and Hugh saw a fluttering hen behind the front wing. Reckless motorists had moved him to rage, but to clean the car had occupied some time, and he dared not order Jim to check her triumphant progress. Tall smokeless chimneys, dismantled factories and rows of huts rolled

back, and Jim indicated rusty railway lines, from which he declared useful locomotives had vanished, without the Munitions officials ever knowing where they went. In camp, he remarked, one might *win* a pair of boots or somebody's British warm, but the Gretna gang went for larger game. Anyhow, the yellow-skinned lasses at the factories stuck to their job. Some were burned and some were poisoned, but the shells driven by Gretna stuff went where the gunners aimed. When Jim thought about the Munitions lasses he took off his hat.

In the dust the keen wind tossed, a large oil-tank rolled down the hill by the red church and swung wide round the curve. The green car's near wheel was off the road, and Hugh thought he heard a crack, but they did not stop and Jim laughed.

"I expect she has got a fresh scratch, but Forsyth did not buy her for her looks."

"On the whole, I'd sooner you did not talk," said Hugh.

The long, straight road to Lockerbie melted under the wheels, and the western hills began to rise in front. Behind flat-topped Burnswark, high Queensberry dominated Annandale; in the background, Hart Fell cut the sky, and Hugh's mouth went firm. Soon they would plunge into the moors where Thor water runs, and for all the Gardiner clan could do, when they sped down the hope Anne would be on board. The engine pulled nobly on the long inclines, and where silver firs stretched their branches across a lodge Jim steered between tall iron gates. In front of the house he turned the car, and they got down.

Hugh told a servant who he was, and was shown into the hall. Jim, carrying his stick, went to a bench by the oak screen at the fireplace.

"I'll wait here," he said. "If you want me, you'll know where I am."

After a minute or two Gardiner arrived. He glanced at Jim curiously; and then turned to Hugh, who said he had called to take Anne to Mrs. Latimer's.

"Quite," said Gardiner. "I expect she will soon be ready, but she agreed for us to see you, and I think you might indulge us."

He pushed back a door and Hugh saw three or four people in a large room. He imagined the group saw Jim, who was, in fact, a rather conspicuous object. Gardiner shut the door and Hugh studied the others. He thought Mrs. Aveling was at one time beautiful. Her type was the nothern type whose charm endures when youth is gone, but restless ambition and disappointment perhaps accounted for her lined face and hollow cheek. Although the glance she gave Hugh was carelessly scornful, he reckoned her his worst antagonist.

Since she knew Frank was not dead, she, no doubt, knew who had helped him on the sands, but Hugh imagined it did not weigh for much. It really ought not to weigh. Although she had not loved her stepdaughter, from her point of view, the marriage Anne thought to make was ridiculous. Hugh himself admitted it was rash. He wondered whether Mrs. Cameron knew her brother was alive; Frank said he had stipulated that she and Mark must not. She was a rather handsome, fashionable woman, and her look was bored. Her husband's face was pink and his neat morning clothes perhaps exaggerated his rotundity. Somehow one knew him for a prosperous city gentleman. Although it looked as if Gardiner was to be spokesman, Hugh imagined Mrs. Aveling had got up his brief.

"Since Anne has engaged to marry you, we felt we were justified to ask for an interview," he said. "We are,

very naturally I think, anxious to know if you can support her."

"I believe Anne herself is satisfied," said Hugh. "I mustn't claim I can supply her with the sort of house and society that you might think indispensable."

"We imagined something like that," Mrs. Aveling remarked. "You have, we understand, a small Canadian farm?"

"A Western quarter-section, one hundred and sixty acres!" said Gardiner. "Half, I suppose, is under crop and some more in summer fallow. When the season's good you get twenty bushels of wheat to the acre. A few moments' calculations would convince anybody that you will never be rich."

"I have been satisfied to thrash fifteen bushels. The farm we had was a half-section, and I got my partner's share. He was a Canadian soldier and was killed in France, when the English battalion on which we reckoned for help was driven back."

"Your luck was better than his," said Gardiner carelessly. "Since we met on the auberge steps, I expect you know the battalion was mine."

Hugh's look got harder. Although the others were quiet, he saw he had excited their curiosity and Mrs. Aveling's eyes were fixed on him. All were antagonistic, but he did not know if Gardiner meant to be nasty.

"My hope is, I may meet the English officer who let us down. However, it has not much to do with my marrying Miss Aveling, and I sold the farm. I expect to take up a fresh block where land is cheap; on the Peace River, probably."

"If Anne goes with you, it's unthinkable," Cameron exclaimed. "We must refuse to allow her to front the hardships your experiment implies. In the far Northwest, I

imagine to get domestic help is hard, coal cannot yet be had, and although the cold is arctic, I believe few settlers' houses are centrally heated or have a hot water supply."

"You do not exaggerate, and there are some worse drawbacks," Hugh agreed dryly. "However, the important thing is, your refusal would not carry much weight."

Mrs. Aveling turned her head and gave him an amused glance.

"You reckoned on some opposition? I suppose the muscular shepherd in the hall is a sort of bodyguard."

"He is my brother, ma'am," Hugh rejoined.

"We do not advance much," said Gardiner impatiently. "I hope you will consider my suggestion. I have business interests in Canada, and am chairman of Kelvenden Land and Developments, which you perhaps know. Our Canadian office is at Winnipeg, but we are opening at Saskatoon and have agents at the new settlements."

Hugh nodded. The company was powerful and respectable.

"On the Peace River summer is short and you may lose all you have got by early frost; the warm Chinook winds do not blow across the Rockies as often as some optimists believe. Anyhow, unless your capital is large, your venture will not begin to pay for five or six years. Since you know something about farming, I will give you a post for pay equal to the best you earned by growing wheat, besides a good commission on the business you transact, and I'll accept your reckoning. After twelve months, the agreement may be revised, to your benefit."

"It looks generous," said Hugh, in a quiet voice. "I suppose there is a stipulation?"

"For twelve months your wedding must be put off. Then, if your progress justifies larger pay, we will not oppose Anne's marrying you."

"The opportunity is the sort of opportunity an ambitious young fellow ought to seize," Cameron remarked. "Your advance depends upon your abilities, and for Anne's sake, your employers will not be narrowly critical. Then I dare say your forcing us to acknowledge your talents will be some satisfaction to her. If you believe you have useful talents, you ought not to hesitate."

Hugh knitted his brows. Had he thought them sincere, he might, for Anne's sake, have sold his independence, but he knew them his enemies. After twelve months the agreement would be revised, and he might be told to look for another post. In the meantime, they would work on Anne, and he saw the arguments they would use. Anne was stanch, but she was proud. He wondered whether they thought him a greedy adventurer, or a trustful fool.

"My engagement stands. The wedding will take place on the day we fixed," he said, and turned to Mrs. Aveling. "If it's some comfort, I may not, after all, carry Anne very far into the wilds. I begin to think we may be able to locate in the more or less populated prairie belt."

Mrs. Aveling's look was languidly scornful. Gardiner's face got red; he perhaps was not often baffled.

"You reckon Anne's money will buy you an improved farm?" he rejoined. "From the beginning you hoped to exploit her fortune?"

The blood leaped to Hugh's skin. When his antagonists found they could not bribe him they knew they were beaten, and in consequence Gardiner let himself go. If control was possible, Hugh must not.

"Not at all," he said. "Until four or five days since, I did not know Anne had money, and I find that I am richer than I thought. Fortune is not the word, but the sum I've got is equal, pound for pound, to Anne's."

The group's surprise was obvious. Cameron, in fact,

looked rather embarrassed. Hugh did not like the fellow, but somehow he thought him the most honest of the lot.

"Your folk resolved to see you out?" he said.

"Something like that," Hugh agreed. "I do not pretend it cost them little, and I am not going to back my statement by documents. My word must go. I am, however, willing for you to tie up Anne's inheritance by a deed of settlement, on any conditions that she approves."

"You are just, Mr. Nicol," said Cameron, and glancing at the others, resumed, as if he apologized: "We had, in fact, thought about the plan."

"But you doubted if you could persuade Miss Aveling? For her to know I am willing might help, but I must know she is willing. Will you send for her?"

Anne came in. She gave Hugh her hand, and he noted that her clothes were her outdoor clothes, and she had put on her hat. Her color was rather high, but she waited calmly.

"I think you ought to know Mr. Gardiner wanted to engage me for twelve months," he said and narrated the offer he had got.

"You, of course, refused," said Anne, and fronted the group with a proud smile. "You thought Hugh greedy, and you hoped his shabbiness would entangle him? Sometimes clever people are strangely dull!"

"There's another thing; and now the plan is mine," said Hugh and began to talk about the marriage settlement.

Anne stopped him.

"I dare say a man likes to be independent, and your object was good. I don't know about the others; but my proper trustee is my husband and you are not at all the sort to squander the small sum I have."

She got up and when she fronted her relations her eyes sparkled and the blood stained her skin.

"I did not want to come back ; I felt I mustn't be shabby, but you did not play up. You thought you could bribe my lover. You did not think for me. All you wanted was to stop my marriage, which would hurt your pride. Well, since we will soon be in Canada, we cannot embarrass you very much—I think you might start your engine, Hugh."

Hugh sent Jim to the car. He heard voices behind the door, but after a minute or two Anne joined him in the hall and a servant gave her her coat. Hugh seized her portmanteau and they went down the steps. At the bottom Anne gave him her hand to help her in the car.

"You are all I have got, my dear," she said.

Then the clutch engaged and the green car rolled noisily away.

XVIII

SASKATCHEWAN

THE short train rolled northwest steadily, but not remarkably fast, and Anne balanced on the rocking platform of a second-class car. Hugh had wanted her to travel by Pullman, but she refused. She declared she was now a prairie farmer's wife and must use his rules. However, she had not had much grounds to grumble, and when they stopped at Winnipeg Hugh had left her and Frank for a week at a large and very noisy hotel.

Anne began to think Canadians hated to be quiet. Elevators clanged in the shafts, steps echoed along the corridors for the greater part of the night, and in the evenings people who seemed to have no business there wandered in and out through the revolving doors as if the rotunda were a public promenade. Yet in the keen throbbing life she sensed an optimistic note she had not remarked in the Old Country. Men moved with a swifter step; one felt their object justified some speed and they hated to be stopped. If one did stop them some, in fact, were not polite.

Since she and Hugh were married three weeks had hardly gone, but fresh scenes had flashed by and melted like pictures at a cinema. For all their speed, some were yet vividly distinct and she thought might haunt her when she was old; for example, the old church on the ridge at Alderswath, the moorburn smoke in the background, and the little group round the car under the yew trees at the

gate. Then, on a dark afternoon the smoke of two cities floated across a gray river, down which the big liner moved. Dock walls and warehouse roofs rolled back; she recaptured the tiers of swarming decks and herself, at a quiet spot behind a boat, feeling but for Hugh strangely daunted and forlorn.

On the Grand Banks they plunged into the Newfoundland fog. Whistles boomed, and with engines dully throbbing, ghostly ships stole by. Bells chimed and sometimes hoarse voices pierced the baffling mist. Slanted masts swung for a few moments into sight, vague hulls topped the long swell and vanished; and the anchored fishing fleet streamed past.

At Quebec Anne was interviewed by an Immigration Officer, who inquired how much money she had, if she were educated, and why she wished to stop in Canada. When she informed him that her husband was going back to the plains he politely passed her on and implied that since she had married a man who preferred the Dominion she was all right. In Canada, *all right* is the standard of approval, but one must properly draw out the vowel sound.

Anne imagined Frank's examination supplied him with freakish amusement and annoyed the officers. He stated that he had then fifty dollars, and but for his meeting two Montreal gentlemen in the liner's smoking-room, he might have had some more. He emigrated because nobody wanted him, and he was already getting bored. The officers rejoined that if he got fresh they would hold him over for inquiries. Admitting his education was defective, he was asked for his college. Frank had thought it famous, but another asked where the college was, and being told, said he understood there was a university at the town. Frank agreed and imagined it accounted for his educational deficiencies.

In the end, Hugh was recalled to vouch for him, and when the officers marked his papers they suggested that he should try a term at McGill. Anne remembered Hugh's remarks.

"Although Canada is democratic, a boss of any sort uses powers nobody would stand for in the Old Country. There's another thing. In Canada, the humor that goes is Canadian humor, and sometimes people who think the joke is on them are rude. You might, with advantage, take your cue from me."

"A boss is an abomination anywhere, but when you think about it, he's democracy's natural product," Harden replied. "Anyhow, you are not Canadian. Anybody who knows the type would know you for an English Borderer while you were yet some distance off."

"It's possible," said Hugh. "All the same, I have some Canadian qualities which you will presently find out."

Anne admitted she had begun to do so. By contrast with Frank, she had thought Hugh rather sure than swift, but since they landed she had sensed a touch of alertness and a driving force she thought something fresh. For example, after one strenuous day at Winnipeg, during which he visited all the implement, seed, and hardware stores in the city, he started at midnight for the West. Anne had wanted to go with him, but he refused. As soon as possible he engaged to telegraph for her, and although Anne herself was obstinate, she agreed to stop. When Hugh was resolved one indulged him.

She looked about. When she got on board the local train at a junction it was dark, and since sunrise the plain the cars rolled across was level like the sea. Snow and frost had bleached the short grass, and the vast sweep of shining silver-gray went back to the horizon. At a few spots they passed, belts of chocolate-black soil checkered

the silver plain. Anne had remarked two or three tall windmill pumps and once or twice a plodding team. For the most part, however, the spacious landscape was wholly desolate. But for the telegraph poles and the long straight track, one might imagine one had reached a land where nobody was since the world was young.

Anne loved space and freedom, but one might have too much, and to know she was not going to the remote Peace River was some relief. From Hugh's new farm one could in two or three days get back to Winnipeg. He refused to use her money, but since she had some, he was risking all his to buy land where wheat could be hauled economically to the elevators. Anne approved. So long as effort and thought might conquer, she did not see Hugh beaten.

Cinders rattled on the roof, the black smoke that tossed about the cars was blown away, and leaning against the platform rail, she looked in front. At length, the ground began to rise, and dim blue smears looked like trees. Behind a rise in the background, two objects one might think were castle towers cut the sky. The train climbed an incline, and rolling through shining sandhills, after a time stopped by a water tank.

Across the track, two new iron grain elevators sparkled in the sun. A brick hotel, a livery yard where some battered cars were parked, two small wooden stores, and five or six shiplap houses fronted the wheel-torn street. Anne speculated about the optimist who had built a hotel at the forlorn spot.

A baggage man leisurely threw a trunk, a keg, and a number of packages on the line. Anne rather thought he wanted to find out if the articles would break. Harden strolled across the track and went up the steps of the nearest store and when the baggage man slammed the car doors he was yet inside. When the whistle blew he jumped

from the store veranda and raced for the train. The locomotive bell clanged, the wheels began to roll, and Anne, clutching the guard rail, leaned out from the steps. For a moment or two, she did not know she shouted excitedly and waved Harden on. Then the group at the next vestibule laughed, and one wanted to bet that the young fellow could not make it.

When Harden was five or six yards off he dropped a shining coin and some cigarettes. It looked as if he hesitated, but resolved to get the train. Anne saw he clenched two or three small packets and some paper money. When he was two yards off, somebody pulled her back and the conductor occupied the step. Harden with his disengaged hand, seized the rail, but it looked as if his feet went from under him, and Anne got suddenly cold. The railroad man leaned down and he and Harden crashed on the steps. Frank's hat was gone, but he yet clutched some small bills and the cigarettes. One or two other bills fluttered back down the line.

"Thanks!" he gasped. "You are a hefty chap."

"I'd like to tell you what you are, but the company expects us to be civil and the dame's about," the railroad man rejoined.

"Oh, well," said Harden, "I have met a politer lot; but, if you are not too independent, you might take a smoke."

He pushed the bills behind the packet and the conductor grinned.

"When I left the shop I had some more," Harden resumed. "The money, no doubt, went down the track. I suppose you could not stop your train?"

"I sure could not. The company claims we run on time and she's not quite two hours late. But why'd you stop so long?"

"A Canadian train is soon fatigued and I reckoned she

would take a rest by the water tank. Then I like Virginia tobacco and the storekeeper offered me the black stuff they smoke in Quebec."

"By and by you'll like the sort of stuff you can get," the conductor rejoined, and gave Anne a friendly smile. "He's a sport all right, but you want to watch him, ma'am."

Harden sat down on the cinder-strewn boards and lighted a crushed cigarette. Anne noted that he did not bother about his clothes, and so far as she could distinguish, the risk he had run did not disturb him. In a way, she thought his adventure typical. After a moment or two he laughed.

"To watch me is Constance's job, and for all her light touch, one goes where she wants. When you think about it, Nature's rule is good; opposite to opposite, and you mustn't standardize the type. F'r instance, suppose Hugh had married Constance, and you had married me?"

"It is not supposable," Anne rejoined.

"There's my argument, I am not a blighted biologist, but in the supposititious case, I can see the consequences. You could reckon on our children's knocking the bottom out of things. One hesitates to picture sober Hugh's and Constance's. You and he, however, are a good combine. He supplies the judgment, you the ginger."

Anne's eyes began to sparkle.

"I am not as fastidious as Constance, but when I'm annoyed my touch is not light. Do you know your hat is gone and your trouser leg is split?"

Harden looked down and pushed his fingers through the gaping hole.

"It's awkward. Hairpins are out of date, but you perhaps yet use the other things that shut like a brooch? Since the clothes were made in England, I cannot logically

grumble about Canadian cloth. Still, if I hadn't been forced to jump on board the blighted Canadian train——"

"Sometimes one ought to be accurate, and the conductor pulled you on board," said Anne. "I do not fasten my clothes with safety pins. Now you are a frontiersman you might use a thin wire nail."

She went back to her corner seat and mused. For all his talk about Nature's rule, Frank's attraction for quiet Constance was queer, and had he not met Hugh on Solway sands, she wondered where he would have gone. Hugh perhaps had not the other's surface charm, but he was stanch and where he used control one knew one was safe.

Anne turned to the window. The plain had begun to roll and little woods dotted the gentle slopes. Sometimes water sparkled in the hollows, and sometimes brush and willows marked a sinuous creek. At one or two spots, large birds, which a passenger said were sandhill cranes, stalked about the flats; the pools were dotted by small dark objects she thought were ducks, and she knew the flock that rose clumsily from a swampy belt for black geese. The passenger said the geese were Brant, and they and the ducks would soon be gone. They but stopped in their long migration, to rest for a day or two in the Park country.

Anne liked the name, and she thought the landscape touched by the quiet charm that marked the smooth pastures and shady oaks in front of an old English house she knew. But now she thought about it, her father's friends were gone and a profiteer owned the hall. Then if one crossed the ring fence, one saw factory smoke and rows of ugly red bungalows that got longer fast. Where the Canadian Park country ended, the tangled pines began and rolled back to the barrens by the Arctic Sea.

At eleven o'clock the locomotive bell began to toll, and she saw a grain elevator, a shiplap store, a hotel, and two or three very small houses. The cars slowed, and when she went to the vestibule Hugh ran along by the wheels. He swung her down and his firm clasp was soothing. The swift steamship and cars were links with the Old Country, but now the chain was broken. All she knew was done with, and she must look in front.

"All's well? Hello, Frank!" said Hugh. "Come on. We must get Anne's trunk before they fire it out."

Stopping the muscular baggage man, he and Harden unloaded her luggage. Anne noted a light, narrow wagon on high wheels, and another in which a man stacked boards. Harden sat down on her trunk and looked about.

"Now I know why a railway porter expects a tip," he said. "Nobody, however, seems keen to help us. What about shouting for the fellow across the track?"

"The man is mine," Hugh replied. "He must put up that lumber and make our camp by dark. We are going to move the trunk. When you are ready we'll start."

Harden grumbled, but he got up and they staggered across the rails and came back for another load. In a few minutes all was on board and Hugh turned to Anne.

"One can dine at the hotel, but they have a pretty full house, and the boys are not fastidious. Their main object is to put away as much food as possible in the shortest time. I imagine you'd sooner picnic, and I have brought some grub."

He lifted her to a bag of hay on the spring seat, seized the reins, and they were off. The locomotive was yet at the water tank and Anne reckoned five minutes had hardly gone since she arrived. In Canada, Hugh was not altogether the man she had known in the Old Country. His skin was brown and the dints in his soft hat indicated that

he had recently carried large and heavy objects on his head. He had not a coat and a leather belt fastened his blue shirt and brown overall trousers at his waist. Anne thought his look was tired.

"I expect you have not rested much," she said.

"We need a house, and I want to break as much land as possible, sow some oats and cut wild hay," said Hugh. "I must have food for my working teams and I'd like to sell some wheat. For two or three evenings the moon was good, and we held on as long as the horses could go. We change them about; one team stops for an hour or two."

"But the men do not?"

Hugh smiled. "The Northwest is not a restful country. Summer's short, and if all is not straight when winter comes, you freeze."

"It looks rather grim."

"Nobody claims Canada is a slacker's paradise, but in the wheat belt, I think you get your chance. Perhaps, if you are willing to sweat and be frugal, you get your chance anywhere. Anyhow, to be independent is something, and your advance is not measured by the boss's good will. There's the land. On the whole, it's good land. If you can stand for the arctic cold and the labor, you win."

Anne nodded. She sensed her husband's pride; he was willing to stand by his merit and nobody's favor. When he did not smile, his look was thoughtful and she imagined his face got thin; his working clothes outlined the firm modeling of his muscular body. In fact, he was like an athlete, stripped for a race. Stripped was the word. One felt he had done with the soft refinements that perhaps embarrassed one in the Old Country. Well, she must not be daunted. Hugh was not moved by vulgar greed. He would take his reward, but he soberly engaged in the struggle because his business was to fight.

Where a little creek curved behind a wood Hugh stopped his horses, and gathering dry sticks, made a fire. Anne noted that he first loosed the team and gave them some chopped stuff from a provender bag. The animals had been on the trail since sunrise he said. Then he brewed tea and opened cans of meat and fruit.

"I mustn't apologize for your lunch," he said. "Our meat is packed at Chicago, fruit is canned or desiccated, and milk is condensed. For all the Old Country superstition, I don't think it hurts us."

"The railroad man's philosophy seems to meet the bill," Harden remarked. "If you cannot get the stuff you like, you must like the stuff you can get. I don't know if I'm polite, but I got worse in Germany."

In order to rest the horses, they stopped for an hour or two. Swift white clouds rolled across the sky and trailed their shadows on the rippling grass. The bluff murmured and thin birch and poplar branches tossed in the wind. In front, the creek sparkled. All was fresh, with a sort of virgin freshness Anne thought she had not sensed in the Old Country. The Scottish soil she knew had borne man's foot and satisfied his needs for at least a thousand years; the lonely moors were dotted by Covenanters' graves and haunted by tales of battles the Border clans had fought. Where the heather grew the bones of Saxon pirates and English bowmen had crumpled into Scottish earth. But for a few wandering Indians and old French *courreurs*, man had hardly begun to exploit the back blocks of the North.

By and by Hugh harnessed his team. The wheel marks he followed curved about scattered bluffs and little shallow lakes, marked sometimes where the water shrank by dusty alkali. Sometimes the faint track went straight across wide grassy flats, and then climbed a rise, from the top

of which it looked as if the plain rolled back to the Pacific in long gray and silver waves. Creeks were not numerous. On the high, central tablelands the snow is thin, and but for the thunderstorms summer is dry.

All was rather spacious than beautiful. Anne felt the wide landscape braced her and the distance called. Something beckoned one across the line where the hard blue sky and white grass joined. The light scintillated; one felt a sort of throb. Hugh had remarked that the Northwest was not restful; she felt it dynamic.

Afterwards she knew she was not altogether extravagant. Hugh's carpenters admitted that they hiked about. One took a job on the Pacific slope; and then went east to the Lakes for another, sometimes for smaller pay. As a rule, the job was not the same job; if you were a carpenter, you hired up at a saw-mill, or you might help re-plank a wooden steamboat. So long as you got on a move, any old job would do. Anne imagined, in England, a house carpenter was not allowed to mend a ship.

The sun went down and the sky got green; luminous green, as if the northern lights shone through. Dull red streaked the horizon, and the bluffs that cut the west were hard and black. The air cooled and Anne smelt the dew in the grass. She knew the smell of a peat moss on a keen morning, but this was different. Somehow the smell was heady; on the high plains the evening cool fired one's blood like wine.

At length, the wheel marks went round a bluff and on the flat behind the trees she saw stacked boards, the braced skeleton of a house, piled logs, ploughs and mowers, a shack with a branch roof, and two neat tents. A fire burned in front of the tents, and when Hugh stopped his team a man stated that supper would soon be fixed. Hugh lifted

Anne from the wagon and when her feet touched the grass she knew why he, for a moment, held her fast. Thorshope and all it stood for were done with. At length, she was home.

XIX

THE HOMESTEAD BUILDERS

LIGHT pierced the canvas and Anne drowsily looked about. Although she had not heard Hugh steal away, he was not in the tent. Yet something had disturbed her, and after a few moments she knew the quick, recurrent shock for the stroke of an axe. Somebody was splitting wood and it looked as if he hit the blocks exactly where he ought. She discovered afterwards that a round block is a *bolt* and one can split straight-grained stuff into thin flakes like slates.

Horses' feet pounded the turf, somebody shouted, and Anne got up. The tent had a double roof, which was carried across a sort of veranda in front. In the veranda she saw a large square can without a top, some soap on a slab of bark, and a fresh towel. Anne smiled. Hugh's house-keeping was primitive, but he had thought for her, and although the water in the can smelt of kerosene, a frontierswoman must not be squeamish. Well, she could roll up the thick blue blankets, beat smooth the railroad straw beds, and pull up the tent curtain when all was straight. By and by she might think about cooking, but since it was a fresh occupation she must not be rash.

She went out. The sun was a yard or two above the plain and the dew in the grass shone like frosted silver. The soil smelt and the morning was wonderfully fresh. Flames leaped up between two parallel logs where a stooping man lifted a kettle, and the smoke flowed away in a thin blue curve. Fifty yards off, the posts and stringers

of the house rose behind the stacked boards and the workmen's shack. Anne thought the skeleton had sprung up as if by magic; Hugh had been gone but a week. Then she saw him, sitting a barebacked horse and leading another. They vanished behind the stacked boards and harness rattled. Then Frank, carrying most of his clothes, ran across the dewy grass and stopped for a moment by the tent.

"At Willow Ranch one does not wait for morning tea and the creek's your bath," he said. "In winter, I expect you go without. However, since Hugh's horses trample up the mud, I must try to get there first."

"Then, you must get up soon," Anne remarked.

Harden laughed. "In Canada, your husband's something like a high-speed dynamo, and I begin to wonder why he did not explode at Alderswath. If you push me hard, I can start, but it looks as if he cannot stop. Well, I imagine breakfast will not wait for me, and a stocking I had last night has vanished and I've lost a blasted collar-stud."

He went off and Hugh joined Anne.

"To see you as fresh as the morning is some relief," he said. "Before you arrived, I was half afraid you might get a jolt."

Anne laughed, a happy laugh.

"You are really rather dull, Hugh, and you don't yet know me. For a week I am going to enjoy a splendid picnic; and then I hope to get to work."

"What are you going to do, little Anne?"

"Wait and see," Anne rejoined.

A man called them to breakfast, and although Anne's appetite was keen her look got thoughtful. The bacon was crisp, the potatoes, dusted with curry, were fried a golden brown, and the hot biscuits, dipped in flavored syrup, were very good. A workman had cooked the stuff

on a fire between two logs ; he fixed the standards she must keep when she had a kitchen stove. There was the trouble.

Hugh's breakfast occupied him for fifteen minutes, which was five minutes more than he usually allowed for food. Then he got up.

"I must go to the railroad for some stuff we could not load up yesterday," he said. "You'll, no doubt, be glad to take a day's rest, Anne, and I hope you will not be dull. If you are going to stop in Canada, Frank, you ought perhaps to know how a frame house is built, and I dare say the carpenters will give you a job. I'll be back as soon as possible."

"You mustn't bother about me, Hugh. I expect to find an occupation," Anne replied darkly.

Hugh got on board his rig. The horse's feet beat the dewy grass, and the rocking wagon vanished behind the bluff. Anne looked up with humorous surprise. She felt her husband was gone almost before she knew. Harden laughed.

"Quite!" he said. "Hugh's a live wire. When you watch him go, you get a shock. I believe *watch me go* is good Canadian. At Willow Ranch, breakfast is not a social function. Since you have got to work, you have got to eat, but you eat as fast as possible. Then I reckon Hugh got going in about thirty seconds. When Mark's sporting pals started for the moors, to load up the car was a lengthy job, and if two or three women went out for lunch, you didn't know when you'd start. In fact, I begin to think my stopping in Canada implies some pluck."

"Some *sand*. You mustn't mix your idioms," said Anne. "But I imagined you undertook to help the carpenters."

"I was ordered to help them ; that's another thing. There are two sorts of bosses ; the sort you try to indulge, and the sort you'd like to shoot. I have not yet decided which

is the more numerous, and in the meantime I'll take a spot of coffee."

"The coffee's gone," said Anne. "I do not want to lose you, but I think you ought to go."

Harden got up, pulled off his coat, neatly fastened back his striped shirt's cuffs, and went. Anne laughed, and by and by started for the spot where the domestic supplies were stored behind some boards. She found a large slab of bacon and some cans of meat, condensed milk, potatoes, flour, beans, and desiccated fruits. The food was wholesome, but it might get monotonous, and for some time she studied a Winnipeg grocery catalogue, and made notes in an ornamental pocket book. Her brows were firmly knit and now and then she thoughtfully sucked the silver-topped pencil.

To keep house for five men looked like a strenuous job, and she did not know where and how to begin. Moreover, she had not yet tried to cook. Well, so long as one was willing, one could learn, and books were written to help beginners. In fact, she had remarked a book of the sort in the window of a store at Winnipeg. On Main Street, was it not? The west side, not far from Portage Avenue. Anne went for her Russia leather writing case, and so addressed the envelope. A frontierswoman ought perhaps not to use a writing case like that, but a real frontierswoman would not need the book.

Then she carried a large basket of potatoes to the creek and laboriously removed their skins. After a time her own smooth, pink skin felt harsh, but on the plains one must not be squeamish and she did not stop. When all were peeled the teamster loosed his horses and lighted a fire. He cut bacon and mixed dough, but before he began Anne noted that he was satisfied to rub his hands on his overall trousers and his knife on his boot. By and by, she resolved, he must use other rules, but in the meantime she

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did not know how far her authority went. Besides, the fellow was friendly, and sitting in the grass, she studied all he did.

Cooking, he said, was a soft job, so long as you had the stuff, but you didn't always have enough. F'r instance, he and a townie started out in winter with a handsled load of traps and skins, to hike two hundred miles. They had a very small lump of bacon, two or three pounds of flour, and a handful of tea.

Anne inquired why they did not take some more. The teamster replied that nobody had yet started a grocery on the road to the North Pole and the stores were all in front, where they were going. In the thick woods, the snow was loose and he reckoned the thermometer was most forty below, but they made Lake Winnipeg, because they had to. And they stuck to the handsled, because the skins were pretty good.

Another time, after a blizzard, they made a homestead where there was grub, but not a fire. Bacon, of course, like marble, and other stuff like granite; and anyhow when the stove gets cold you cannot live. The homesteader was away at Saskatoon, the woman had let the wood get low, and then the blizzard came and she could not go for more. She and the kiddies were in the wall bunk, freezing under all the clothes they had.

Anne refused to dwell on the picture, and she asked what the narrator did.

"We split some wood," he replied. "Lighted up the stove and made hot soup; bacon, beans, and flour; any old stuff we found. Then we cut some more wood, and next day we quit."

He told one or two other tales of the sort, and Anne pondered. In the back blocks, man lived by labor and careful thought. The State did not help, and in some circumstances his neighbors could not. If he were slack and care-

less, perhaps if he were unlucky, the cold destroyed him. Well, Hugh frankly admitted the Northwest was a stern country; and man was given brain and muscle. In the meantime, however, she must learn to cook.

At dinner she saw Harden had tied a handkerchief round his hand and his thumb-nail was black. He remarked that the edges of shiplap boards were sharp and when one used a hammer, at the proper speed, one did not always hit the object at which one aimed. Anne thought he was not keen to resume his labors, but he went, and when he got back for supper the handkerchief was ragged and stained by blood.

"I expect one must pay for one's apprenticeship," he said.

Hugh looked up and smiled.

"Sometimes the premium is high, but if you can hold on for the first few weeks, you'll make good."

"I'm going to try," said Frank. "I don't know if to carry boards as fast as another is a very ambitious ambition, but I'm obstinate."

"It begins to look as if a little obstinacy might sometimes be useful," Anne remarked in a thoughtful voice.

"When you farm in Canada, it's useful all the time," Hugh agreed.

"Oh well," said Anne, "so long as you are modest. As a rule, when a man is stupidly obstinate, he thinks he's firm. One can, of course, be resolute without being right. But will you take some more drips and bannock? Bill is really a pretty good cook, but the bannock's hard. Wait until you try mine!"

Frank looked up and grinned; Hugh chuckled, and for an hour they rather languidly talked and joked. The long day was over and Harden had frankly had enough. Hugh had walked from the railroad by his laboring team. All

were young and hopeful, but now the sun went down they were satisfied to loaf.

On the Sunday morning Anne resolved to experiment. She declared Bill ought, for once, to rest, and she would cook dinner. Hugh, however, must not superintend. He might take a holiday and try to shoot a sandhill crane, but since Frank, after carrying boards, was not keen about walking, he might stop and help. Hugh and Bill went off, the carpenters boiled their clothes in a large coal-oil can, and Anne got to work.

"Since my cookery book has not arrived, I must not be adventurous, and we'll stick to bacon, beans, and potatoes," she said. "I would, however, like something fresh for dessert. Drips and flapjacks get monotonous."

"Safety first is a useful rule," Harden agreed. "*Drips*, I suppose, is the sweet, sticky stuff you get in a can; but you really mean something *different*, because none of the lot is fresh. Well, we have some dried apples. Why not try near fruit?"

Anne opened a bag and pulled out a handful of flat, shriveled rings.

"Hugh calls them *desiccated*. Do you know how they're cooked?"

"I think perished is the word," said Harden. "I am not an expert, but if you put a quantity in a can and add water, I dare say they'd get soft. The can should not have been used for coal-oil very recently."

He found a can and Anne studied the shriveled fruit. "The next puzzle is, how much, or how many, one ought to use?"

"I wouldn't be parsimonious. Be a sport and give them the lot," Harden advised.

Anne put in a rather large quantity, and Harden, adding water, balanced the can on the hearth logs. Then they cut the bacon and potatoes, and he pulled out his watch.

"All's on time, and the sun gets hot. For half-an-hour we might sit in the shade by the bluff."

They found a shady spot and Harden smoked. Anne watched the swift clouds' shadows trail across the grass. By and by she jumped up and ran to the fire.

"The apples, Frank!" she shouted. "They are *coming out!*"

Harden, following her, saw a trickle of swollen fruit overflowed from the can. When he arrived, the trickle had become an eruption, and a cloud of steam leaped up from the bubbling, hissing mess. Harden turned, and started for the carpenters' shack as fast as he could go. Anne dared not move the large can, but she raked away the fire, and then tried to push back the escaping fruit with the charred birch poker. After a few moments Harden arrived, and pushing two board ends across the can, put a large stone on top.

"Now," he said, "we have got them! One oughtn't to be revengeful, but if you throw on some fresh wood, we'll get our own back. There's another stone ready, and I'll engage to see the treacherous stuff does not shove off the lid."

By and by Hugh arrived and Anne served the food. She had not thought he would grumble, but she wondered whether politeness cost him much. When he inquired for dessert, Harden grinned.

"I expect Anne would sooner not let it out."

Hugh moved the stone. A bubbling mess welled across the can's top and he pushed back the boards.

"You must allow for some expansion," he remarked. "Another time, use a fourth of the quantity and let it soak all night."

"I did not want to be parsimonious," Anne rejoined.

XX

A SUMMER HOLIDAY

SPRING swiftly melted into summer, and while the soil was yet frozen a foot under the fresh wheat, the sun burned one's skin. In a few days the prairie changed from silver-gray to green, and one morning the green was splashed by red where the Saskatchewan lilies rolled in the wind. But for a few hours after sunset, the wind never dropped, and thin white clouds sped southeast.

The geese and cranes were gone, but birds whose wings were barred by gold haunted the bluffs. Little gophers, like English squirrels, burrowed by the trails, and sometimes a stealthy jack-rabbit, dappled white and brown, loped across the grass. Hugh told Harden the large rabbit changed its winter coat like the Scottish mountain hares.

When the house was boarded the carpenters went. Hugh reckoned he and Bill could fasten on the roof shingles, machine split in British Columbia. In the big woods of the Pacific slope where straight cedars grow, he might himself have cut his roofing material, but his bluffs were birch, and birch is awkward, cross-grained stuff. Helped only by Bill and Harden, he built a turf and birch-pole stable and sank a shallow well.

For three or four weeks, however, the stable waited. Hugh's first job was to break ground for a catch crop, and three horses hauled the big plough through the matted sod. In a narrow belt he planted the potatoes he reckoned they would use; and then, where the disc harrows cut the clods, scattered hand-sown oats. The seeds would spring in the broken stuff and might choke the weeds, and when

he could reckon on food for his working teams, he might yet sow a few acres with quick-ripening wheat.

Then he must break ground for the next year's crop, mow wild hay where he could find it, and cut cordwood in the bluffs. Before one bought Alberta coal at the railroad one must be prosperous. The thin birches and poplars ought to be cut before the sap began to flow, but they would dry out in the hot sun, and one split the sawn bolts easier when the wood was green. To find time for all was the trouble. The small farmer's first summer on the plains is something like a race in which the loser pays, and Hugh admitted he was rather late to start. Yet, if he could but keep his nerve and speed, when winter again advanced he ought to have reached the safety line.

Bill was a useful man, and although Hugh admitted some surprise, Harden stayed with his job. He was not a first-class ploughman, but he could manage horses, and sometimes a team would do for him what they would not do for Bill. It looked as if he thought labor something of a joke and when he hurt himself he swore humorously. In fact, Anne and Frank rather puzzled Hugh. He had fronted some daunting obstacles and for long had gone without, but when he was up against it his mouth went tight and his mood was grim. The others laughed, and he imagined they did not pretend. Anne was as happy in her new house as if it were a doll's house and she a child; the square stove and her cookery book were intriguing toys.

The kitchen occupied the ground floor but for the partitioned space Anne called her drawing-room at one end. A door opened to the large lean-to woodshed where Bill and Harden slept, and a ladder with flat steps went up to the bedroom in the roof, which the stove pierced. In summer, the stove was moved outside to the veranda.

At length, when the wild hay was cut, the strain got slacker, and Hugh, for Anne's sake, resolved to take a

holiday. Loading a tent in the wagon, they started north, and for three or four nights camped by lonely bluffs and little, shallow lakes. Sometimes they stopped at a new homestead and talked about the crops, but the farms were widely scattered, and when the oblong of dark-green wheat melted all one saw was the quiet rolling plain.

The settlers interested Anne, and she thought them queerly mixed. She saw one or two swarming *habitant* families whose Quebec French altogether baffled her, a voluble, melancholy Russian, whom for all his first-class English she thought slightly mad, and young fellows from English and Canadian cities. Their tools were as mixed, for Hugh noted tractors and gang-ploughs, horse teams, ox teams, and one or two battered cars. There were yet no roads. At some spots a wheel-marked trail went south to the railroad, but for the most part one took the shortest line across the grass.

When Anne talked about the settlers Hugh said that after Riel's half-breeds went, the farming Pioneers who opened the Northwest sprang from Anglo-Saxon stock. The best perhaps for the stern job were Scots and Americans from the woods of Ontario and Michigan, but some London clerks and city folks, rather surprisingly, made good. Their children, however, went back to the cities. So far as Hugh could see, the fresh British emigrants were marked by the other's practical competence, but some at all events seemed to look for a standard of life and comfort that had not yet been reached in the wheat belt.

The North was for the hardy and the men who could go without; the strong Swedes and prolific French-Canadians might by and by crowd out the rest. He did not know; nobody knew, but the political and social economy swiftly evolving on the plains was not the sort of economy one knew at home. London had nothing to do with it, and

Ottawa perhaps had not much. Winnipeg and Saskatoon ruled the West.

Hugh had thought they might reach the thick woods where, protected by stern game laws, the big moose yet lurked. Anne, however, imagined he began to calculate the distance from his farm and think about the chores he had left undone, and when she ordered him to turn south he agreed. After all, she had enjoyed a splendid holiday. The team, although a plough team, were lighter animals than the British Clydesdales, and went as fast as anybody on board a wagon would want to go. Hugh reckoned their ancestors were bronchos, but they had inherited larger bones from imported stock; the Suffolk Punch he thought.

As a rule, the party stopped at noon and for two or three hours gathered large wild strawberries, or loafed by a shady bluff. All day, the round white clouds floated across the sky, but about five o'clock, when the wind got light, the woolly cumulus massed in a lead-colored arch and thunder crashed. Where Hugh could tie his horses, the group got under the wagon, and for twenty minutes savage rain beat the grass. Then the clouds again rolled on, and in the shining, tranquil evening they looked for a spot to camp. One needed wood and water, but mosquitoes haunted the creeks and ponds, and after supper the smudge fire's smoke curled about the tent and the stamping horses pushed into the pungent haze.

About four o'clock on the last afternoon, Hugh found, in broken ground, a shallow *coulée* he thought might carry them south. A little creek curved about the hollow, but the flats between the loops were smooth, and glancing back to the northwest he drove faster. The wind had dropped, the clouds massed, and he sensed a sort of tension in the atmosphere. He did not expect to reach his farm that night, but he hoped he might before long see a thick bluff.

"Are you not rather pushing the horses?" said Anne. "The sun was hot for the poor things, and you calculated we could not get home."

"It looks as if they were willing," Hugh remarked. "A prairie horse knows the prairie, and I dare say ours have noted there is not much shelter as far as one can see in front."

Anne turned her head. In the background, the sky was a queer oily black and the *coulée's* top got indistinct. Moreover, she thought the ominous gloom advanced.

"Are you afraid of really bad thunder?"

"We might get hail," said Hugh. "The time is not quite the proper time, but on the high plains you never know."

The *coulée* got wider, but by and by it curved, and for a time the folding banks cut his view. Then he saw, three or four miles off, a dark blurr he knew was a wood, and he used the whip. The horses went faster, wheels rattled furiously, and the light wagon's box-body rocked. Harden used the folded tent to ease the shocks; Anne jolted up and down on the spring seat. Moreover, Hugh took the shortest line for the wood, and did not turn for long grass where a sloo had dried, and belts of short tangled brush. Sometimes she thought a wheel was off the ground; crashing jolts and savage lurches marked their tumultuous advance.

It looked as if speed were justified, for although they went fast the storm went faster. Behind them, the sky was low and dark, and tossing ash-gray vapor joined the clouds and plain. The gray haze was pierced by lightning and crossed by slanted rain. When the lightning flickered, the oblique deluge shone like polished spears; one pictured their stabbing the drenched turf. The roar that marked their flight was louder than the confused turmoil of the storm.

Tremendous thunder crashed. In front of the plunging horses, flakes of dry grass went up in revolving spirals, and one shivered in the sudden cold. The bluff was four or five hundred yards off, and Anne saw the thin trees bend. It did not look as if one would get much shelter where the broken twigs hurtled down wind behind the wood. Then, on the other side of the *coulée*, the bank curved back, and Harden touched Hugh.

"If you can turn your horses, go for the house."

To get the team round was awkward; the animals' object was to reach the bluff, but Hugh, with a swift side glance, saw the house and thought somebody signaled on the veranda. In the circumstances, he must not indulge the brutes, and he braced his feet against the wagon front. The horses plunged, the pole went up, and for a moment two wheels were off the ground, but he had got a good fulcrum and his arms and legs bore the strain. The team went round in a quarter circle, and seeing where he steered them, started savagely for the farm. Hugh let them go and speculated about the creek, which they must cross. As a rule, a prairie creek flows in a ravine, but he did not think the banks were high and some wheelmarks indicated the homestead trail.

Horses and wagon plunged obliquely down the bank, but the birch-log bridge at the bottom went straight across, and Harden imagined all must take the creek. Somehow they did not. Hoofs and wheels flung off the turf that covered the shaking logs, and helped by their speed, the animals strained up the incline. Harden had watched R.H.A. drivers rush the guns across shell-torn ground in France, but he acknowledged Hugh's nerve was good.

When they stopped behind the homestead, a young fellow sent Anne to the house and helped the others loose the team. At the door a young woman gave Anne her hand and took her to a matchboarded kitchen.

"You were lucky to make our house and you must stop for the night. The storm is the fiercest we have had," she said.

Anne remarked her cultivated voice and glanced about the room. A red glimmer indicated that somebody had lighted the stove, but the kitchen was not warm and the growing turmoil called her and her hostess that commanded the plain.

Torn leaves tossed about the bluff across the *coulée*; and then the trees vanished and but for the lightning all was dark. Anne did not know if the noise was thunder or the wind, but the house rocked and the little veranda's shingled roof throbbed like a drum. Although she had thought to see water splash from the eaves, the stuff that drifted across the boards was ice. Hail was not the word; the lumps were large and crashed against the posts like stones shot from a catapult. One felt they must soon beat down the shingles and pierce the shiplap walls.

Anne did not hear the others arrive, but by and by they were in the room, and she saw their host shake the hail from his battered hat. For five or ten minutes all were quiet, and only the red flicker from the stove pierced the daunting gloom. Then the uproar got less violent, and light crept back through a wavering curtain of torrential rain. For the worst five minutes Anne admitted she was afraid. She had felt the North dynamic, and now she had seen its dark forces suddenly let go. Afterwards, when she knew its arctic cold, she loved the wind-swept, virgin land, but the haunting touch of fear never altogether went. In the North man lives by Nature's sufferance. He is not yet her conqueror.

The young fellow fetched chairs and the group sat down by the stove. The rain drummed on the shingles and one felt the cold, but the storm got farther off and the wind began to drop. Anne acknowledged the house a

better house than hers, and the stable she saw from a window was strongly built of logs.

"The hail was pretty fierce," their host remarked. "D'you think it has hurt the wheat? I feel I want to go out and see."

"You might wait until the rain stops," Hugh replied. "I have known a bumper crop torn to ragged straw, but the stuff is not far advanced, and to cut back the short stalk might help a stronger growth. A neighbor in the Old Country allowed his sheep to feed on his springing oats; he declared he thrashed as many bushels as the field had grown before."

"That's comforting," said the other. "You, I guess, are Mr. Nicol. I am Adam Drummond, recently from Montreal, and we are happy to meet you, particularly since my hired man tells me you are an old-timer and he reckons you know your job. Mine is something fresh, and I'm willing to weigh all the sound advice I can get."

"Sometimes it helps," said Hugh. "Experiments are expensive, but, after all, the knowledge you find most useful is the knowledge for which you pay."

"Quite," said Harden with a chuckle. "Hugh is a good farmer. His philosophy is not deep, but so far as he goes it's workmanlike. If Mrs. Drummond is interested, Anne and I can tell her how desiccated apples ought not be boiled. We know because we found out."

Drummond gave his wife a smile.

"It's up to you, Minnie. If you allow our guests to think a man can teach you cooking, I'll feel you let me down. Anyhow, until they have taken supper and breakfast Mr. Nicol's pal might wait. The rain is not stopping and they must camp with us to-night."

Anne signed Hugh to agree. She thought she would like Drummonds, and the group soon engaged in friendly talk.

XXI

A TENDERFOOT PIONEER

AFTER supper Hugh went with Drummond to look at the crops. He thought the young wheat, although battered, was not much hurt, and the oats might grow stronger for the setback. After all, Drummond's luck was good, for had the hail fallen a week or two later, the crop might not have had time for recovery. Hugh noted another thing; for the most part, the farm occupied the shallow *coulée* behind the long bluff. The location, in a way, was attractive, but it had some drawbacks, which Hugh did not know if he ought to point out.

The evening was cold, the rain fell steadily, and re-joining the others in the kitchen, they lighted their pipes and talked. Hugh imagined Anne and Mrs. Drummond were already friends. He himself liked his hosts and he knew their type. Moreover, he thought the cultivated young North American a first-class type. As a rule, the young fellows were friendly, polite to strangers, strongly built, and marked by a sort of driving force they did not pretend to hide. He did not know if their intelligence was keener than the intelligence of well-bred young Englishmen; their interest, at all events, was quicker and franker.

Hugh, however, knew another sort whose calculated rudeness provoked one to use one's fists. In fact, he had once or twice done so. By and by Drummond, encouraged discreetly by Anne, began to talk about himself. He had, he said, graduated at McGill. His relations were Montreal business men and had planned an opening for him in a good merchant house.

"But, if you were going to be a merchant, why did they send you to the University? McGill is the Canadian University, is it not?" Anne inquired.

"There is another at Toronto, and one or two more, of a sort," Mrs. Drummond replied, with a smile. "Comparison is invidious, but I believe Adam thinks Toronto provincially Ontarioan. In England, one understands, University graduates have not much use for business. Commerce does not attract your keenest brains."

"Sometimes one doubts if our bright young athletes have the keenest brains. Those I knew certainly had not," Harden remarked. "But we would sooner Mr. Drummond went ahead."

Drummond said he was willing to be a merchant, but the war began and he went to France. Since he wanted to get to work he was not keen to go, but Sam Hughes, and some others, thought he ought. In France one weighed things and soon found out that a number of traditional slogans and so forth did not carry the weight one thought. Drummond glanced at his guests and added that he imagined they understood. They, no doubt, were there.

Harden laughed. "When you study my pal, you spot the Sam Hughes' stamp. In the Old Country, it was Kitchener's, and it implied that you started first. The eyes-front glance and tilted chin yet mark the British infantryman. I myself was in Germany for some time; but the important thing is, a number of one's most respectable convictions went West in France. I suppose, when you got back, you didn't know if man's proper object was to get rich quick?"

"I'd begun to think Canada over-commercialized," Drummond agreed. "All our talents are used for business and manufacturing. Politics do not attract us much, and, on the whole, politicians are not an attractive gang. Yours, however, do not work for much direct reward."

"Sometimes one wonders," said Harden. "If you are extravagant, you can buy instructive books about political economy, but politicians' economics is, or are, another thing, and so far as I know, philosophers refuse to investigate. Anyhow, if you are in office, you can get your pals a job, and graft was known before King Louis and Frontenac tried to break the free-trade fur *courreurs*."

"Mr. Drummond is trying to tell us why he resolved to farm," said Anne, and gave Mrs. Drummond an apologetic glance. "Frank's history is not always accurate, but he does seem to know Frontenac was not, as I imagined, the gentleman who built the conspicuous red hotel."

Drummond chuckled and Hugh reloaded his pipe. He had but known his hosts for an hour or two, yet he felt they were friends. When one met Canadians of the proper sort friendship ripened fast, and a Western homestead kitchen was a remarkably homelike spot. The reserve one used in the Old Country melted and nobody pretended. Until little Anne emigrated she had dined, so to speak, in state, and she had not known how her food was cooked. Yet she was happy by the kitchen stove, and Hugh half-consciously gave thanks for it.

In the meantime, Drummond resumed. He had not, he stated with naïve frankness, particularly wanted a soft job, and so long as Minnie was satisfied he was not keen to be rich. Anyhow, he did not want to be a tight-mouthed, bald dyspeptic like some prosperous gentlemen he knew. So long as he did something useful, he would sooner use his muscles and keep his body fit where the sun shone on him. Then Western Canada needed Canadians; the crowd whose object was money flocked to the United States and left the plains to foreigners. Minnie agreed, and although their relations thought them freaks, they took the cars for the West.

Anne turned to Mrs. Drummond, who gave her a smile.

"Oh, well, I love horses and I was sports champion at my college. In Canada one likes to get busy, but I was not ambitious to be leading lady at a country club. Where you use effort you ought to get results, and to drive a golf ball farther than a man puts you nowhere. If you help your husband grow a wheat crop, you have got the wheat. I suppose something like that accounts for my keeping house on the plains. And you?"

"I had no ambition at all," said Anne. "Hugh and Frank were going to Canada and so, of course, I went."

"Anne's a reckless sentimentalist," Harden remarked. "All the same, one must acknowledge her a gallant little soul."

"Her reply is better than mine; anyhow, it is franker," Mrs. Drummond rejoined, and turned to Anne. "I suppose Mr. Harden is your brother?"

"Frank is my stepmother's son," said Anne. "We rather feel as if he were our nephew."

The others joined in Harden's laugh, and Hugh went to the window.

"You began your breaking on the low ground," he said to Drummond. "Where are your corner posts?"

Mrs. Drummond looked up, rather sharply. Her husband crossed the floor and indicated his boundary line.

"I waited for you to ask. I started to plough where I did start because the larger half of my land is in the hollow. Along the banks the gravel soil is dry and light. What about it?"

Hugh sat down. He saw Mrs. Drummond waited, and he thought Drummond wanted him to be candid.

"It looks as if you know the drawback."

"When I bought the block I did not know. The traction-plough contractor who broke the piece did not, I suppose, think his business was to put me wise, and the first hint I got was from my Ontario hired man. Since

he had helped on bush farms, he allowed he did not know much about the plains. Well, by comparison, you are an old-timer."

Hugh was sorry for Drummond. He must not exaggerate, but he refused to cheat.

"As a rule, up-to-date wheat, which ripens soon, escapes the frost in fall," he said. "Something yet depends on the season and where you sow, for light frost first nips the crops in a hollow. You run a risk nobody perhaps could calculate. If the fall is warm, you will get your wheat. You might, in fact, for two or three years thrash a first-grade crop."

"But when frost comes early I might lose the lot?"

"I'm afraid that is so," Hugh agreed.

For a few moments the others were quiet. Drummond brooded, but by and by Mrs. Drummond said to Hugh:

"Adam bought the land because I liked the spot. After the bleak plain, the little valley, with its sheltering bluff, and winding creek, had some charm."

"We were city tenderfoots," said Drummond with a crooked smile. "All the same, I reckoned I knew the sort of block I wanted—I mustn't locate to lee of a sand belt where the blowing grit would cut the grain, and I mustn't locate on gravel; the black alluvial gumbo was the proper stuff. Then I must see the water was not too strongly alkaline, and so forth. I did not know crops on low ground froze when crops on a rise escaped."

"You were sold a pup?" said Harden in a sympathetic voice.

"A gold brick," said Drummond. "However, I got the sort of block for which I asked, and since I did not inquire about harvest frost, I cannot claim I was stung."

Anne's eyes sparkled. "But the land broker knew! A trick that's dishonest only at one point is the shabbiest

trick of all. Don't you feel you'd like to shoot the unscrupulous brute?"

"I have felt I would like to do so," Mrs. Drummond remarked.

Going to a bureau, she carried some papers to the table, and beckoned the others, who saw a plan and a perspective drawing of a new prairie town. Broad avenues, squares, and street car lines were marked; one noted church towers, a stately opera house, a post office like a palace, and so forth.

"A circular invited us to buy the few remaining corner lots and watch the value of our investment go up," Mrs. Drummond resumed. "An honest real estate agent is, of course, a useful man, but the unscrupulous booster is Canada's curse. He forces up rents, he fixes an artificial price for all you need, and when the bubble bursts the reaction cripples trade and industry. Rash speculators pay for their folly; nobody will buy their lots, and Canadian taxes on held-up land are large. You perhaps know the spot, Mr. Nicol?"

"I was there," said Hugh with a dry smile. "I do not know the picture. The town I saw was not at all like that."

"A pretty good example!" Drummond remarked and turned to Anne. "The plan is the plan of a city the boosters think might be built. In the meantime, they hope their customers, a thousand miles off, will not investigate. Anyhow, so long as prices go up, nobody bothers, and when all crashes you find the exploiter has got out and gone. However, at present the town has four grain elevators, three pretty good hotels, and a locomotive round house. It *might* go ahead."

"You never know," said Hugh.

"The fellows ought to go to jail," said Anne. "Did you buy your land from them, Mr. Drummond?"

"I reckoned I was not altogether a fool, and I negotiated with the agent for a respectable land company. In a way, I suppose, I wasn't cheated. I stated what I wanted, and I saw the land, which seemed to meet the bill. Then, of course, nobody can guarantee your wheat will not freeze."

"We mustn't grumble," Mrs. Drummond agreed. "All the same, the fellow knew we were raw, and saw his chance to unload a piece of land no old-timer would buy."

"Which was the company?" Hugh inquired.

"The Kelvenden Land and Development."

Anne's pose got stiff and the blood came to her skin. Harden laughed, a queer jarring laugh.

"Sometimes I wondered how Mark got rich! If you can get bullion price for a gold brick, of which the inside is common clay, your profit is large. But I admit your being able to do so implies talent of a sort, particularly in Scotland and Canada."

His hosts' interest was obvious and Drummond said:

"The Kelvenden Company's president is Mark Gardner. Do you know him?"

"It looks as if I am beginning to; I had suspicions before. Anyhow, he's my cousin. I believe he does not boast about our relationship, and as a rule I do not."

For a few moments the others were quiet. Hugh saw the Drummonds were embarrassed, and he thought Anne divided between imperious anger and something like shame. Harden baffled him. Frank certainly had not used Scottish reserve, but one could never calculate Frank's reactions. Sometimes he was freakish; sometimes he indulged the stubborn contrariness Scots call *thraum*.

"I do not claim the deal was a frame-up; I got the goods for which I asked," Drummond remarked.

"Quite," said Harden. "Anne's remark about the trick that's partly honest seems to meet the bill, and you mustn't

apologize. I am not Mark's champion; in fact, where it's possible, I like to baffle the blighter. Very well. Kelvends let you down, and if I can, in any way, help to put things straight——"

Anne smiled, but her smile was proud. Frank's father was a Scottish gentleman; he was perhaps ridiculous, but he felt the Gardincrs had let down the clan.

"That's the stuff," she approved.

"Nothing's doing," said Drummond firmly. "I must pay for my trustfulness."

Anne signaled Hugh, and then fronted Mrs. Drummond. Hugh waited; he had known Anne competently seize control before.

"You are our neighbors; on the plains I suppose nine or ten miles is not really far. Sometimes, when the men are in the fields and the house is quiet, I feel I would like a friend. Friends ought to be useful and my husband is a good Canadian farmer; in England his people were farmers for two or three hundred years. If he sees a plan, you may be sure the plan is sound."

"In the Northwest, farming is not at all a soft job," Hugh, remarked and addressed his host. "Are you, and more particularly Mrs. Drummond, satisfied to stay with yours?"

Mrs. Drummond said they hoped to do so. One hated to be beaten and, if they could make good, she would be happy on the plains. Moreover, the house and land had cost her husband a useful sum.

"Did they cost you all you had?"

"We kept something back for a reserve fund," Drummond replied. "On a hundred and sixty acres you cannot, of course, get rich. I thought, if my experiment succeeded, I might take up fresh land, and so forth—do you suggest we ought to sell the place and buy another?"

"Not at all," said Hugh. "The gumbo soil in the *coulée*

is good stuff. If you sowed artificial grasses, you would get a bumper crop and the bluff would be useful shelter for hardy stock. Your land is just right for a mixed farm, and my notion is mixed farming ought to pay."

Reloading his pipe, he developed his argument. Wheat, at sixteen bushels, or twenty bushels, to the acre was not a remarkably profitable crop, and the soil must, at some time, be fertilized. If one had cattle, one could sow strong clover and grasses in the summer fallow. So far, one could cut wild hay for one's working teams in the sloos, but one must go some distance for it, and by and by the land would be fenced. Then the Government fostered creamery schemes and dairy products were in keen demand.

"I expect you are logical," Drummond agreed. "For some time, however, wheat must be our main support, and if I let the *coulée* go, the crop I can raise on the high ground will not meet my storekeeper's bills."

"That is so," said Hugh. "I saw a shack behind the bluff, and, I think, a corner post. The farm's recorded and taxable, and since it's not used, the owner might sell. Can you buy the quarter-section?"

Drummond looked up, as if he were interested.

"I might, and I believe the owner is willing to sell. My hired man knows where the fellow is, but Tom has gone for a few days to Saskatoon. I begin to think you have hit the proper scheme!"

"Very well," said Anne. "As soon as you hear from the farmer, you must come across and visit with us."

Mrs. Drummond agreed, and the group began to talk about something else.

XXII

HARDEN PONDERES

THE Drummonds visited at Hugh's homestead, and he was glad for Anne to have a friend. His farm occupied him from soon after daybreak until dark, but on Sundays he was entitled to rest, and when the Drummonds did not arrive for picnic lunch, Anne and Harden, as a rule, persuaded him to look them up for supper. Sometimes when he did not need his team, they on other days left him to his chores and went off visiting.

Hugh did not grumble. All that might be done before arctic winter came must be done, and so long as Anne was happy he was satisfied. She was happier than he had at one time dared to hope. Her skin was brown like a gypsy maid's; she carried herself like an athletic boy. At dark Thorshope, Anne was marked by a queer charm; now Hugh thought she bloomed like a flower in the sun. Yet he knew she sometimes pondered. Anne began to see a farm in the Northwest was not the sort of holiday camp she might for a week or two have thought. Her habit was to front with a smile such drawbacks as he could not remove; but he had known her mouth go tight, and when the strain came, as come some time it must, he did not think little Anne would break.

Then he no longer doubted Harden's ability to make good. Frank was a better, and steadier, workman than he had imagined. His careless talk and freakish humor were to some extent misleading. When he was willing to concentrate, he arrived at a just conclusion sooner than Hugh, and so far, he stayed with his job. Whether he would for

long be willing to do so, was another thing; he admitted his farming was an experiment. Hugh imagined Frank sometimes consulted with Anne, but he did not know where their cogitations led.

Drummond had found the owner of the land Hugh advised him to buy. The fellow was a mechanic, and after a winter at his shack he had gone to work on the railroad. He was now at Calgary, but he expected to be sent to a Manitoba division, and would then fix to meet Drummond at Brandon or Winnipeg. So far as Hugh had heard, the negotiations stopped there.

Harden got back from Drummond's one evening soon after the mail-carrier arrived, and when he had glanced at one or two letters pushed them into his pocket and went off. Since he did not return and Anne knew the hand on one of the envelopes, she went to look for him. Harden was sitting by the wood-pile, his back against the birch blocks. He firmly clenched his cold pipe, and an open letter was in the grass. Anne knew he did not see her, and for a moment or two she looked about.

The stable was behind the stacked wood, and one smelt the wild peppermint in the hay mow under the roof. The rather primitive pole and turf building, the back of the small house, and the horses behind the corral fence occupied the picture's foreground. The animals, advancing slowly, cropped the grass, and the movement of their long sloping necks and thin legs was harmonious and smooth. A high-wheeled wagon, crusted with mud by a recent thunderstorm, rather cut Anne's view, and in the willows by the bluff meat and fruit cans sparkled. She admitted the picture was rather homelike than romantic. In the background, however, the plain, melting from green to dusky blue, cut the luminous orange on the horizon.

"Are you pondering deeply, Frank?" she asked.

"I suppose I was. The occupation's something fresh,

and I begin to feel a strain," Harden replied, and pulled down a few blocks for a seat for Anne.

"As a rule, you're a pretty good counselor, and I have got Constance's reply."

"Then, you asked Constance something?" said Anne.

Harden nodded. "In a way, it bothers me. She's splendidly generous, but she mustn't be reckless. A strong-minded fellow might not weigh a girl's advice; but you know Constance, and a girl ought to understand another."

"Only a man would think one girl *like* another. We are really more distinctively individual than you," Anne rejoined. "However, you are not conspicuously strong-minded, and you have weighed my advice before."

"Very well. When Hugh helped me cheat the doctor, I was persuaded I'd sometime find the swine who let me and B Company down. Now I doubt, and he might, of course, be dead. If I went back, the thing would haunt me, and I'd picture my pals' distrust when they, perhaps, had none. I'd always be afraid somebody I annoyed might whisper the tale. And all I was forced to bear Constance must bear."

"I suppose that is so," Anne agreed in a sympathetic voice. "She is brave, Frank."

"Of course," said Harden. "I have got her splendid letter. She declares her engagement stands, and I must take the line I think best. There's the trouble, because whichever line I take will cost her much. In Canada nobody knows people think I ran away. I like the plains, I begin to think I might farm and not go broke, and Hugh, rather guardedly, agrees. But Constance? For my sake, she'd pretend to be content. However, you know Alderswath and you know her fastidiousness. Do you see her happy at a spot like this?"

With a sweeping gesture he indicated the back of the

small house, the mud-crusted wagon, and the rubbish dump by the bluff. Anne looked up, rather quickly.

"The spot is my home and I am happy as ever I was at Thorshope. But I do not pretend I am fastidious."

"Sorry!" said Harden. "You're a sport, little Anne. In a way, the ground is awkward, but if you think about it——"

"Yes," said Anne, "I think you are getting entangled. Since I'm not afraid to use common words, you meant Constance is pernicketty, and rather old-maidishly particular, but I am not! Well, she really isn't, and sometimes I'm generous. Anyhow, I'm not jealous. The discomforts I can front will not daunt her, and if you feel you ought to stop in the Northwest, she will see you out. She's *entitled* to see you out."

Harden indicated the letter. "She claims it is her right. You are a noble pair, and one ought to be thankful for some women's pluck. But we'll let it go and talk about something else. Suppose I resolve to stop? Drummond's a first-class sort, and if he buys the fresh quarter-section, I might join him. There's a nook behind the bluff where I could build a house. Hugh, of course, does not need me. He's horribly competent."

"But Drummond is not? You think two incompetents the proper combine? I don't know if you're logical."

"Looks like a fresh entanglement," Harden remarked with a smile. "You mustn't be annoyed; I'd sooner you tried to use my point of view. The psycho-analysts' stuff does not interest a sound, active man. Your complexes and so forth are like your domestic organs. To talk about them isn't decent, and so long as they don't bother you, the proper plan is to leave them alone. All the same, sometimes you must stop to think where you are going and if you really want to go. Well, if I was Hugh's partner, he would steer me and I would but carry out his orders. In

fact, he'd carry me along, and in his farm he has already got a strong man's load. If I join Drummond, I must think for myself. We will, no doubt, pay for our mistakes, but we ourselves must meet the bill, and another time we'll use some caution. Then I expect Constance would sooner her husband stood on his own feet. However, I dare say you begin to see the argument?"

"It was obvious when you started," said Anne, and for a few moments knitted her brows. Then she nodded. "Yes, Frank, I think the plan is good. We had hoped you would stop with us, but, after all, you are not going far."

She went to the house. Harden studied Constance Latimer's letter and mused happily.

About a week afterwards, Drummond arrived one evening. He had got a letter from Hayes, the owner of the land next his. Hayes was now at Winnipeg, and fixed a price, stating that his offer stood for fourteen days and the sum must be paid when the sale was registered at the Government land office.

"The fellow has consulted with the Winnipeg realty brokers," Hugh remarked. "The block is not cheap, but I expect he would get the price, and if you want the land, you ought to take his offer."

Drummond admitted the sum was larger than he had thought; he had hoped part might stand on mortgage, and he must try to sell some stock. Harden said he could get the money, but he must write to Bob Latimer at London, and ask him to cable a Montreal bank. Bob, too, might be forced to sell some shares, and so far as one could reckon, the cablegram would but arrive in useful time. Hugh suggested that he might telegraph at cheap night-letter rates, but Harden said they had agreed Bob must do nothing about the money unless he got an order in Harden's hand. In consequence, he must start for the

railroad at daybreak and send off the letter by the one daily train.

"I have some other news," said Drummond, and pulled out a newspaper. "Your relation, the Kelvenden president, is at Winnipeg and made a pretty good speech at a dinner given by a boosters' club."

Harden frowned, but he took the newspaper and by and by began to smile.

"Looks as if Cousin Mark knows something about boosting; the Gardiners are not notorious for their modesty, and the paragraph recording his interview with the newspaper man is Mark at his best. Mr. Gardiner is shortly starting for Saskatoon and a tour round the northern settlements. When he gets to work one can watch out for important developments in the prairie belt. I see him making a sort of triumphal progress, trailing clouds of publicity. Although I have not Mark's talent for putting across pompous bunk, I'll give you a few extracts."

"The speech is horribly vulgar," Anne remarked.

"You are a *pukka Sahib's* daughter, and the traditions you inherit are Anglo-Indian," Harden rejoined. "I believe in the I.C.S. boosting is not allowed; anyhow, if you boost yourself, you must use some tact." He laughed and turned to Drummond. "I have heard a statement that Old Country people are not good salesmen. The newspaper is respectable, but they've given him nearly a column. One wonders how it's done."

"Our newspapers like something snappy, and one makes a sort of allowance for the boosters' style. After all, they are local patriots, and the leading note in American humor is exaggeration. If you are a Scot you build your joke on under-statement, but I admit some Scottish jokes baffle me. However, I understand the Kelvenden Company is buying

land along our branch railroad, and it's possible Mr. Gardiner might look round our district."

Harden's mouth went tight, and he glanced at Hugh.

"If Mark arrives, I will not run away, and I expect he will get a knock. But my letter to Bob must go by tomorrow's train, and I'll get to work."

He sent his letter, but Latimer's cablegram did not arrive and the fourteen days ran out. Hugh's farm was seventeen hundred miles from Montreal and the steamer he thought would carry the mail was not fast. On the fifteenth day, however, a young fellow arrived from the settlement on a motorcycle, and at daybreak next morning Hugh's team took the trail. He was needed at the farm, but he declared Anne was entitled to a holiday, and she and Drummond and Harden got on board the train.

At Winnipeg they met Hayes and another gentleman in the rotunda of a large and noisy cheap hotel. Hayes' clothes were good, but his skin was pallid and his broken nails and the dark graining in his hands indicated that he occupied himself with greasy iron and coal. His companion was a young, keen city man.

"Mr. Clay is a realtor, and if we can fix things, he'll put the deal across," said Hayes. "We might have gone to his office, but you wired you'd come right here."

"We reckoned all was fixed. Our wire stated we agreed to give your price," Drummond rejoined.

"That's so," Clay said, smiling. "You ought to have sent the wire two days before."

"If you have sold the block, it's done with. We think you might have waited."

"We can sell," said Clay. "I guess I'd have closed the deal, but Hayes thought you ought to have a show. If you'll come up to the other fellow's figure, the land is yours."

He stated the sum the other was willing to pay, and

Drummond knitted his brows. He wanted the land, but his reserve fund was not large and he hated to feel he had been stung.

"I guess we'll let it go," he said. "Mr. Hayes does not own all the section, and I can get another lot. In a way, of course, you're right, and our wire was late, but it looks as if you thought you'd put the screw to us."

"We sure did not," Hayes declared. "I'm not rich and I want all I can get, but I could have made the trade five or six days since. I had only to record the transfer and take the dollars."

Clay signed him to be quiet. "There is no use in getting mad. Mr. Hayes is straight. As you know, Mr. Drummond, a section of land is cut by government survey in four, square quarter-blocks. The larger half of yours, and of the blocks north and south, is in the *coulée*. There's some gravel in the lot behind you, but I'm selling it to the folks who want Mr. Hayes', and you can't extend in that direction. If you want good wheat soil, you have to buy his block, and all he asks is the price the other folks will give."

"Who is your customer?"

"Mr. Lomas, the Kelvenden Company's local agent."

"The gold-brick man!" said Harden with a queer laugh. "Looks as if I'm up against dear Mark another time. We will take the quarter-section. If you think me rash, Adam, I will bear the extra cost. Do you approve, Anne?"

Anne's eyes sparkled. "Of course, Frank. If you need more money, you can use mine."

"We're not yet broke," said Harden. "Sooner than be beaten, I'd pawn my old coat. Well, Mr. Clay, if you meet me at the bank in half an hour, I can satisfy you that our check is good; and then we'll record the sale at the Government land office."

"That's all right," Clay agreed.

The group broke up, and when they were in the street Harden smiled.

"On the whole, I think the investment sound, and anyhow, we have baffled Cousin Mark. From his point of view, a quarter-section is not the sort of block one bothers much about; but when he knows who bought the piece I expect his emotions will be mixed."

By and by Drummond left them, and Anne said, "Do you really think Mark meant to keep you in the rest home?"

"At all events, he did not apply for my release," Harden replied in a queer hard voice. "Mark has political ambitions and he perhaps thought I might indulge in some fresh escapade; anyhow, I was not the sort of relation a candidate for Parliament wanted about. Mark, of course, would not enlighten the doctor. The fellow's honest and I admit he put me on my feet, but he was justified to weigh a hint that my relations would sooner he made a safe and permanent cure. Time, so to speak, was no object. And the doctor's fees were charged to my estate. You cannot expect a Scot to see the humor in a joke like that."

XXIII

GARDINER GETS A JOLT

AT the headland Hugh swung his plough from the furrow and stopped his team. A thunderstorm had wet the turf and sometimes the soil stuck to the moldboard's curve. When he looked down the long, tapering furrow, the clods did not lie as evenly as they ought, and green splashes checkered the soil where grass tufts pushed through. The plough was the best he could buy, but the moldboard had not yet got its proper skin. Sometimes the curved steel does not polish soon.

Hugh got to work with a small wooden scraper and a coal-oil rag. In the Northwest, one does not bother about a ragged furrow; one's object is to break as much land as possible in the shortest time. Hugh admitted he was perhaps fastidious, but he sprang from a long line of yeomen farmers and he had inherited their skill and love for a workman's job. Moreover, a good job paid. On the plains, one fellow thrashed seventeen bushels of wheat from an acre, but another thrashed nineteen.

When Hugh was satisfied he started his team. Three horses strained, chains and cleaves rattled, the grass roots parted with a noise like tearing cloth, and the black clods rolled back to Hugh's trampling feet. To some extent, his labor was mechanical; he could feel that the plough went straight and smoothly, and he looked about.

As summer advanced, the boisterous west winds got lighter, and round white clouds floated serenely across the sky. The grass was yet fresh and shone in the hot sun;

the plough breast sparkled like silver in the dark, greasy soil. Hugh was breaking virgin sod. His first year's work was a sort of skirmishing advance; in spring he would start on the real campaign. All the same much had been done, and when he glanced across the *breaking* to the oblong where the oats grew he saw the tasseled heads pushed through their pale-green sheath. He had food for his horses, and he would have some wheat to sell.

When the wind touched the field the heavy wheat rolled in slow waves. It was dark green; down among the thick stalks were smears of indigo, and where one saw the strong color all was well. In fact, but for the swarming flies that followed the horses, Hugh admitted he was altogether satisfied.

By and by he saw Anne, carrying his lunch, by the edge of the wheat. Her summer clothes were yellow, and her light figure cut the background of green and blue. Her shady hat was a man's Stetson, and she walked with a buoyant swing. Hugh thought nobody whose thoughts were moody could walk like that. At the end of the furrow he loosed his team, and when the horses went off to the creek he carried Anne's basket to a shady spot by the bluff. The hired man was looking for straight poles at another wood a mile or two back, and when he was not home for dinner Anne and Hugh picnicked in the grass.

After lunch, Hugh lighted his pipe and resting on his bent elbow stretched his long legs. Anne, balanced on a crooked poplar branch, studied him critically.

"Your arms are like a blacksmith's arms, your neck is brick-red, and your blue shirt hurts one's eye," she said. "I don't know if indigo and vermilion harmonize."

"The shirt is new, and since I doubt if the dyers used indigo, its brightness will fade. At one time, I liked vermilion. Now I begin to think the prettiest colors are pastel gold and brown."

Anne smoothed her short dress. "It is rather pretty, and was not expensive at the Winnipeg bargain store. I suppose my skin is like a gypsy's, and my fresh charm is gone; but you mustn't bother to be laboriously polite. The wheat looks pretty good!"

"Sure," said Hugh with a twinkle. "The crop's all right, but your *good* is not. If you want to be accurate, you might study Bill's. At harvest our little patch will melt in the dry plain, but when the wheat runs straight across a three-hundred-acre block you'll know something about red and gold and brown."

"The time's not yet. Still, I really believe our rash experiment is working out better than you felt you ought to expect. In a way, of course, your stopping to think for me was nice; but after all, in order to be useful one need not be as strong and large as a mule."

"It looks as if that is so," Hugh agreed.

"Oh, well, so long as you don't grumble—but I'm not altogether happy about the money."

"Which money? Whose money?" Hugh inquired.

"Frank's. A man pursues a subject until one's badly bored. We, however, switch our thoughts about. Anyhow, a cheap writing desk is not a first-class safe."

Hugh laughed. Harden had brought back from Winnipeg a useful sum in Canadian bank notes. Since he had fixed to join Drummond, he would need lumber for his house and hoped to put up the main posts and stringers before the frost; then they had resolved to buy an extra team, and so forth. In the meantime, the notes occupied a corner of Hugh's bureau desk.

"Our neighbors are few but I expect they're honest. Farming is not an occupation that has much charm for crooks, and the only Canadians who robbed me were the storekeepers."

For a minute or two Anne was quiet, and Hugh saw she pondered something.

"I wish Mark was not in Canada," she said by and by. "At Thorshope he talked about Frank with a sort of scornful indulgence, but sometimes I thought he hated him."

"Frank does not love his cousin," Hugh remarked.

"In a way, he has better grounds than Mark; but it's rather entangled. I believe his mother hurt him worst, but he refuses to admit it, and since she and Mark are confederates, he makes Mark his antagonist. She agreed to his being sent to the rest-home; he was, of course, willing to go, but they would not ask for his release. He imagines they meant to keep him there as long as possible."

"I imagine you agree with Frank."

"One tries to be just, but sometimes it's hard," said Anne in a thoughtful voice. "The Gardiners are ambitious, and shabbily ambitious people are heartless. They feel their friends and relations ought to help them climb the social ladder. If you are famous, they boast about you; if you're poor and unlucky, you ought to be punished because your poverty humiliates them."

"But Frank is Mrs. Aveling's son."

"Yes," said Anne, "it's rather horrible. I hope I do not exaggerate."

She began to talk about something else, and by and by a man from a farm four or five miles off stopped his team and saluted with his whip.

"I reckon we located just where we ought; this township's stock is going up," he said. "Ogilvies and the Port Arthur folk are going to build elevators right along the track; the wheat pool and the railroads have got together about a scheme for speeding up grain transport to the Lakes; and as soon as we raise some dairy cattle, we'll

have a creamery. We are going to get farm telephones. We're going to get most all any man could want."

"Well, that's good," said Hugh. "I have heard something of the sort before. But where did you get the news?"

"I was at the settlement last night," the other replied with a laugh. "The Kelvenden president took the floor; he has pals at Ottawa, the wheat pool and Winnipeg board of trade bosses are his townies, and he reckons he knows! Pretty good boosting, for an Englishman. We had a kind of notion you folks couldn't talk."

"The notion is not quite accurate," Hugh remarked. "I expect Kelvendens' has bought land pretty largely and is willing to unload. But where is the fellow? A night at the settlement hotel would be enough for him."

"He hired Taylor's rig and is going north up the range. Got one of his agents with him, and Taylor reckoned they'd make Drummond's in the afternoon. They wanted to look at some land by the *coulée*."

"Was the agent Lomas? The fellow who sold Drummond his place?"

"Lomas got fired," said the farmer. "The man's from Saskatoon, but I have some chores waiting. S'long!"

He started his horses and Anne got up.

"Frank is at Drummond's, Hugh!"

"Yes; it might be awkward. I suppose I must go across."

"Since some tact might be useful, I am going," said Anne.

"I'd sooner use force. Blast Mark Gardiner!"

"Now you know why I am going," Anne rejoined.

Hugh went for his horses and they took the trail.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, Mrs. Drummond occupied a canvas chair in the veranda. The small frame house was very hot, her most urgent domestic chores were

done, and she was justified to rest. She glanced at Drummond's blue shirt by the work-basket on the floor. Adam must tear off his buttons, and she ought to sew some on, but the row up the front was colored and all she had got were white. Then Anne had sent across an American magazine with a moving tale about a Montana nester's wife. Montana was not a very long distance off, but its citizens seemed to be a romantic lot. Mrs. Drummond wondered. A Canadian farmer's wife had nothing to do with flamboyant adventure; her business was to work.

A cool shadow stole across the plain. When it melted, the shining grass rippled in the wind and the poplars by the house tossed their leaves. The low note was soothing, and on the dazzling page the print got blurred. When the magazine slipped from Mrs. Drummond's hand she did not know.

By and by wheels rattled and she looked up with a jerk. She perhaps pushed out her foot, for the work-basket capsized, and cotton reels and buttons rolled across the boards. Mrs. Drummond frowned and kicked her husband's shirt under the chair. Taylor, of the livery yard at the settlement, pulled up his team at the steps and two gentlemen got down.

"We are bound for the Hopkins' place, but these gentlemen want to look at a piece of land, and the sun is fierce for my horses," said the livery man. "If I might give them a drink and some chop ma'am."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Drummond. "Loose your team. You know where the feed bin is."

On the plains hospitality is the rule, but the strangers were not plainmen, and she would sooner they had stopped at another farm. Her scattering the stuff in the basket was annoying, and she had not properly pushed Adam's shirt under the chair.

"Hayes' corner post is just back from the *coulée*. I'll

take a look around the block," one remarked and went off.

The other went up the steps. He was strongly built and red-faced, and somehow his thin summer clothes were like a uniform.

"You are Mrs. Drummond, I expect?" he said. "If we disturb you, I must apologize, but Taylor refused to tire his horses, and my companion wanted to see the land across the *coulée*. I am Mark Gardiner, president of the Kelvenden Company, which you perhaps know. The other is Mr. Morgan, our local agent."

Mrs. Drummond indicated a bench. It looked as if Gardiner had not heard that Harden and Adam had bought Hayes' farm, but when the transaction was carried out Lomas was his agent. Then she wondered whether Harden and Gardiner ought to meet. She knew they were not friendly.

"My husband is ploughing," she said. "Perhaps you would like a drink? I can give you some lemonade. We have, of course, no ice."

Gardiner politely took some lukewarm lemonade, although it was not a drink he approved. He noted Mrs. Drummond's cultivated voice and thought her attractive, but he sensed a touch of coldness that rather puzzled him. She could not be antagonistic, because she had no grounds for antagonism.

"We bought our farm from your company," she said.

"I did not know," said Gardiner. "Lomas, our recent agent, perhaps carried out the transaction. Our head office is at Winnipeg, and for the most part, I am in England."

"But you are accountable for your agents. You approve the lines on which they work?"

Gardiner thought the note of antagonism more distinct, but he was not going to dispute. One did not dispute with a woman; one allowed her to state her grievance and carried on as before.

"The company's general policy is fixed at Winnipeg and London. Our agents have some discretion. We do not bother them about particulars."

"They get an office and all the money they can use, and you expect *results*? I do not know a better word. If the agent does not earn a profit for you, he must quit, and if he is a little unscrupulous, your customers pay. If he is remarkably unscrupulous, you disown him? I think you were justified to disown Mr. Lomas."

Gardiner's face got red, but he smiled.

"Lomas is gone. I believe Kelvendens are honest brokers. If we cheated, the company could not stand for long, but I expect our competitors would acknowledge we go ahead."

He stopped and Mrs. Drummond thought she heard horses' feet. Gardiner, however, was looking the other way, and after a moment or two a bucket clanged behind the house and a board in the kitchen cracked. She did not think the step was Drummond's and she jumped up, but Harden, carrying a glass of lemonade, pushed back the door and leaned against the post. Gardiner was on the bench along the wall and Mrs. Drummond stood where she hoped to block his view.

"The flies were busy around the jug in the kitchen," she said. "Come on and I will give you some of the fresh brew I put out to cool."

"In the bucket at the door?" said Harden, with a laugh. "Well, you see I spotted the jar. Adam's plough-point hit a nigger head and I went for a hammer." He held out the glass, in which the pale green liquid was level with the brim. "Nothing like a useful job to brace you up, particularly if the job's in Canada! When my relations showed me into the bughouse, I'd have splashed the lot overboard."

Gardiner jumped up and noisily pushed Mrs. Drum-

mond's chair out of his way. Harden turned his head and coolly drained his glass.

"By George, it's Cousin Mark!"

Gardiner fronted him, his hands pushed into his pockets as if he dared not trust his control. Mrs. Drummond saw he had forgotten she was about and imagined him carried away by mixed emotions. For a moment a sort of incredulous surprise was most obvious, then something like fear, and animal fury. The hint of fear was puzzling, but, for a moment, she had thought Gardiner afraid.

"Then, you were not drowned!" he said. "I admit I doubted. Your instinct for self-preservation is notoriously strong. But to see why you allowed your mother to think you dead altogether baffles me."

Harden yet leaned against the doorpost. His pose was rather laboriously careless, but he had not put down the glass. Mrs. Drummond thought he balanced the tumbler as if he might fling it at his relation's head. In the meantime the beat of horses' feet got loud. The others did not hear, but she hoped the rig would stop at the house.

"It looks as if you had got a nasty jolt, but if you were a sport, you'd hide your feelings and pretend to be glad," Harden remarked. "Anyhow, I refuse to talk about my mother, and we might with advantage discuss some other subjects. To begin with, since I expect to stop in Canada, you will not be forced to acknowledge me, and I'll undertake not to boast about our relationship. In fact, when my friends here found out you were my cousin I felt rather *sick*."

Mrs. Drummond touched him.

"Adam waits for the hammer, Frank."

"Your object is good, ma'am. Adam is a patient soul, and I dare say he can fix things with the spanner on the plough; but if you would like to tell him I am occupied

— You see, I have much to say to Mark, and most of it is interesting."

"I am going to stop," said Mrs. Drummond firmly.

"The house is yours. If you are willing to receive Cousin Mark, I must not object. The drawback is, your stopping rather cramps my style."

"Since Mrs. Drummond received you——" Gardiner began savagely.

Harden stopped him. "Use the proper rules, dear man!" He turned to Mrs. Drummond. "Mark implies that you're trustful; but that, of course, is so."

Gardiner's face got fiery red and the veins on his forehead swelled.

"Your hosts presumably do not know you deserted your battalion under fire. I doubt if you informed them that in consequence of your indulgence we were forced to put you under medical restraint."

"There you are wrong," said Harden. "My friends do know something about it; perhaps the strange thing is, they trusted me farther than my relations did. However, you yourself do not yet know all I think you ought to know. For example, two doctors certified that I was not madder than other folk, and a lawyer thought I had some grounds for an action—— I have not yet told him to get on with it; but I might."

"I wonder!" said Gardiner, with an effort for calm. "For one thing, you have not much money, and so long as I am, by the deed you executed, your trustee, I hope, for your mother's sake, to control your extravagance."

"You believe I squandered the other part of my inheritance?"

"We found out that you had rashly sold first-class stocks and shares."

"Exactly," said Harden. "When you sell first-class shares you get a first-class price. However, I suppose you

reckoned you knew where the money went? Betting and wine, since you'd sooner be polite. Well, Mark, for a prosperous business man, you are by no means as clever as you think."

Gardiner gave him a surprised glance, but rejoined grimly: "Anyhow, I control a useful sum of yours."

"You're an unconscious humorist; I'll try to state the joke. So long as you hold the deed and the power of attorney, my money's in your hands. You imagine the documents are in your safe at Thorshope? Well, it's pretty obvious you have not recently looked them up. If you find the papers, I'll give you five hundred pounds."

Gardiner's skin got dark with blood and his mouth went crooked. He had forgotten Mrs. Drummond was about, and he clenched his fist.

"You stole into my house?" he shouted.

"This house is not yours," said Harden, and balancing the thick lemonade glass, drew back his arm. "All the same, I rather hope you'll force me to risk a shot. I believe I could send the tumbler where I want, and I'd very much like to try."

It looked as if Gardiner might jump for him; Mrs. Drummond imagined passion carried him away and Harden's humorous calm was but a mask. If the other advanced, Frank would fling the glass. She might push between them, but she saw a better plan. Both were pre-occupied and had not heard a rig stop behind the house. She sped across the kitchen, and ran back to the veranda with Hugh and Anne.

Broken glass, cotton reels, and buttons were scattered about the boards. Harden, lightly balanced and using his feet like a dancer, circled round Gardiner, who waited, braced but alert, as if he thought to sweep his antagonist down the steps by a smashing charge. Hugh, pushing in front of Gardiner, threw him strongly back, and stagger-

ing across the floor he struck the bench and sat down before he knew. Anne seized Harden, but she fronted Mark.

"You will stop on the bench, sir," said Hugh.

Gardiner fought for control. He had rashly allowed Harden to sting him to fury and in consequence he was ridiculous; but control was hard, and he felt he hated the big calm farmer as much as he hated Frank.

"Looks like a gathering of the clans," Harden remarked. "Now Hugh takes the floor, I really think Anne might let me go."

"I suppose you are exploiting the fool," Gardiner said to Hugh. "When his money is gone and you have no further use for him, he will be sorry he did not leave the deed in my safe."

Anne stopped him. She was royally angry and the blood surged to her skin.

"At Thorshope you implied that Hugh exploited me! We have not used Frank's money. Since we built our home he has been our guest, and now he is the partner of Mr. Drummond, whom your agent cheated."

"I expect Lomas did think he sold Adam a gold brick," Harden agreed. "It, however, begins to look as if there might be some gold in the article. I'm afraid, dear Mark, your man did not know his job. But who is this?"

Gardiner's recently appointed agent came up the steps. He gave the group a surprised glance, but said to Gardiner:

"I took a look round the Hayes quarter-section. The land is pretty good."

"Quite," said Harden. "The soil is first-class, but it isn't Hayes's. Drummond and I bought it very recently."

"Lomas declared he had an option on the block," said Gardiner.

Harden gave him a smile.

"Although you're not rashly trustful, I imagine you got

stung! Anyhow, the quarter-section is mine and Drummond's, the sale is properly recorded, and our title is good. You are baffled another time, Cousin Mark, and since I'm supposed to be cracked, the implication is, your talents for business are not remarkable."

Gardiner turned from him savagely and ordered his agent to send for Taylor and the rig. Then he lifted his hat to Mrs. Drummond.

"When I stopped at your house I had no grounds to think that I might entangle you in a dispute. If Mr. Drummond imagines he has a grievance against our discharged agent, the company will weigh his claim. In the meantime, I thank you for your hospitality."

Carrying himself stiffly, he went down the steps, and Harden laughed.

"If Mark gets another jar, I reckon he'll explode."

XXIV

ANNE'S REFUSAL

THE evening was dark and hot. The wet soil smelt, and steamy damp floated about the house. Sometimes distant thunder rumbled, and sometimes, for a few minutes, heavy rain beat the roof. For all the heat, one could not use the veranda, and the wide-gauze door was shut. In damp, hot weather, mosquitoes and sandflies swarm.

Mrs. Drummond occupied a couch in Hugh's kitchen and languidly studied a Winnipeg newspaper. Anne in an easy chair, carried some sewing, but for the most part her fingers were quiet. In the dark, thundery calm she could not concentrate, and she longed for the brooding storm to break.

The rain stopped and she heard a horse in the corral behind the house. It moved restlessly along the fence, as if it did not want to be alone, but its step was uneven. The animal had broken through the rotten turf over a badger's tunnel and was lame. With something of an effort, Anne got on her feet and took a small loaf from a wood-pulp pail.

"I am not really extravagant, and when you give away something you do not want you mustn't pretend to be generous," she remarked. "The loaf is getting hard and Roy is fond of bread. He's rather a pet, and now his leg hurts, I expect he feels we ought to sympathize with him."

The gauze door clashed. As a rule, a mosquito door is shut by a powerful spring, because if it closed slowly, the bloodthirsty insects might invade the room. Mrs. Drum-

mond smiled. Anne Nicol was marked by a whimsical kindness for animals, and when she called, the wire rang as the horse pushed its neck across the fence. The other horses were not about. Although the wheat and oats ripened fast, harvest was not yet, and since, for the most part, the summer's chores were done, Drummond and Hugh's hired man were at the railroad and might not be back until morning. Hugh and Harden had started for a settlement where an implement agent demonstrated in the field the usefulness of some new agricultural machines. In consequence, Mrs. Drummond had come across for the night.

Anne gave the horse the bread, and when the flies began to bother her sent the animal off and looked about. In the west, a pale glimmer pierced the massed clouds, and when she turned her head, the top of a rise was touched by a yellow light. Behind the rise the sky was the color of old lead, and she thought it somehow as heavy and solid as the metal. By contrast, the yellow gleam was like a spotlight flash. In the foreground, the wheat was a vague, flat-blue smear, and, for the first time, Anne thought the dark oblong small. Well, one's first year's crop was small, but something was done. When one reckoned up, much was perhaps done, and she had helped.

She heard a thin, droning note and a mosquito stung her neck. Another nipped her hand, something pricked her forehead, and she ran for the house. Pursued by the insects, she was awkward and the slamming door pinched her foot. Mrs. Drummond looked up and laughed.

"In the Old Country, one understands, advanced young women swear."

"I do not. At all events, if I do swear, it's only when I'm properly mad. But perhaps one ought to say *het-up?*"

"Mad, I think," said Mrs. Drummond. "The other's

out-of-date and rubric, and when you were home you were something of an aristocrat."

"I'm home now. At Thorshope I was a sort of Cinderella, and since comparisons are invidious, I believe madam, my stepmother, rather resented my growing up. At Willow Ranch I'm plain cook. Anyhow, my cooking's plain, but I am willing to stay with my job."

"You're a sport, little Anne, and sometimes I am jealous. The boys love you! But the newspaper states your relation is back at Winnipeg and records his views about progress in the West. He has engaged to stop for a dinner the realtors are getting up; and then he is sorry he must start for Montreal."

"If I did swear, I'd startle you," said Anne. "Mark Gardiner is not my relation; he is my stepmother's nephew and a pushful, vulgar pig!"

"And you hate him?"

"No, I do not really. One mustn't exaggerate. Mark stands for all that I dislike; he's greedy, selfish, pompous, and a bully. One might hate a stick-at-nothing villain, but Mark is not a villain. When you know him, he's altogether commonplace; *ordinary* is your word."

"But he got the Cross in France."

"The Silver Cross; Hugh got the Medal," Anne rejoined. "The Cross you get for valor is common bronze and costs but five cents. Only men like Mark would have it made of gold. I don't know about his sending Frank to the bughouse, but he certainly did not ask the doctors to let him out. Frank *was* rather dippy. Something had bitten him."

Mrs. Drummond laughed. "For an Old Country lady, you surprise me, Anne. After all, cultivated Canadians do not talk like that."

"If you are a plain cook, or a great lady, you can talk as you like. Then perhaps when you copy people you copy their worst points and leave alone the others you ought to

imitate. However, we were discussing Mark. Although his agent sold Adam a gold brick, he himself does not cheat. For example, he seized Frank's money because he thought his extravagance might humiliate the Gardiners, but when he let it go he'd have accounted for all with current interest. The Gardiner's are perfectly *respectable*. Yet some respectable people are shabbier than a pick-pocket."

"I am glad you are my friend," Mrs. Drummond remarked.

"Oh, well," said Anne, "I believe I'm stanch. I would not hurt Mark Gardiner, but I'm glad he's gone. Until he arrived, we were as happy as one can hope to be, but Mark stands for the loneliness and bitterness I knew before Hugh carried me off. Somehow he's ominous, like the brooding storm. However, I expect the storm will soon break, and when it's gone my queer mood will go."

She glanced at her wrist-watch. Eight o'clock! It looked as if Drummond were stopping at the settlement. Dark would not fall for two hours, and since one could not sleep, there was not much use in going to bed. Anne resolutely concentrated on her sewing.

The lame horse moved across the corral, its feet unevenly beating the wet turf, and Anne looked up. Somebody had disturbed the animal and in a few moments she heard steps. She thought it strange; the next farm was some distance off and as a rule a Western farmer drove about in a rig. A man pushed back the door. The evening was dark and his face was not distinct, but Anne thought him nobody she knew.

"I suppose this is the Nicol farm?" he said.

Anne reflected that she and Mrs. Drummond were alone, but a storm threatened and the fellow was entitled to claim hospitality. Besides, he held back the door and the mosquitoes would soon swarm into the room.

"Yes," she said. "Come in."

The man signaled and another joined him. Anne indicated chairs across the kitchen and studied the pair. Their clothes were greasy and the wet grass had rubbed their boots nearly white. Yet for all their shabbiness, the men themselves were clean. Anne thought the cleanliness the sort of cleanliness a soldier was taught to use.

One was a rather handsome, athletic, black-haired fellow; the other's skin had a queer yellow tint and when he fronted the light his eyes were strange. He was short and strongly built, and although to call him sinister would be to exaggerate, Anne would sooner he had arrived when Hugh was at home. The men, however, were in the house, and in the meantime she could not send them off.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"If it wouldn't bother you, we would like some food," the black-haired man replied. "We camped in a bluff last night, and the mosquitoes worried us. All we had for breakfast was some crackers."

The stove was not burning, but Anne gave them the best she had. The athletic man ate greedily, but when she glanced at him she was not jarred; she thought his companion fed like a pig, splashing the cold coffee on the table and dropping broken food on the floor. His appetite, however, was soon satisfied, and when he lighted a rank pipe Anne's eyes began to sparkle. She reflected that she had only Mrs. Drummond to support her and tried for calm.

"Why are you wandering about on foot?" she inquired.

"We haven't got a rig," the short man replied. "We were looking for a job, and we got one. Five dollars to pull down a tractor and find out why she wouldn't go! Took us two days and spoiled our clothes."

"Harvest will soon begin," Mrs. Drummond remarked.

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"If you can stook, or are willing to learn, somebody would hire you."

"We're not willing. Twenty dollars a month for a beginner, and you work from sunrise to dark. Not for us, ma'am. Worse than digging gun pits for the artillery. We had some in France!"

Anne looked up. They were old soldiers and a vague, disturbing suspicion crept into her mind. She said nothing, and Mrs. Drummond resumed:

"Soft jobs are not numerous in any part of Canada, but the worst spot I know for a tired man is the Northwest."

"We would take a white man's job," said the dark-haired fellow. "In fact, if we could find Mr. Gardiner of Kelvendens, we reckon he'd see us right. We heard he was at the Drummond farm, but when we got there only the hired man was about. He told us Mrs. Drummond was visiting with Mrs. Nicol and we shoved on."

"Sometimes Tom is not very bright. However, I am Mrs. Drummond, and Mr. Gardiner was at my house. I believe he is now at Winnipeg. You might give him the newspaper, Anne."

"Blast that tractor!" said the short man. "I didn't want to stop."

"We wanted five dollars," his companion rejoined and took the newspaper. After a few moments he angrily crumpled the page. "Gardiner's shortly starting for Montreal!"

The other looked at him dully, as if he had got a knock, and said nothing. Anne knew them. The athletic fellow was Balham and his companion was Mullins. If they thought to blackmail Mark, they were very rash, but it had nothing to do with her and they did not know who she was. Yet, when she thought about it, their imagining they might force Mark to bribe them was queer, since so

far as they knew, Frank was dead. Then it looked as if Mullins braced up.

"We have got to be in Winnipeg before he goes."

"We were in Captain Gardiner's battalion, ma'am; but there was another officer, Mr. Francis Harden, who wouldn't let us down," Balham said to Mrs. Drummond. "We thought him dead, and it's possible the young fellow at your farm is not the gentleman we knew. I believe he was at Mrs. Nicol's."

Anne discreetly signaled. The men perhaps thought Hugh, like some Canadian farmers, had taken a pupil and although they had found out that Frank had joined Drummond, they would not expect him to inform his partner that he had supposititiously run away in France. Anyhow, Anne was willing for Mrs. Drummond to take the floor.

"Mr. Harden certainly was at our farm," Mrs. Drummond replied. "He, however, went away not very long since, and I believe is now at a northern settlement. You could not get there on foot for two or three days; and then you might find out he was not the gentleman you want."

"Blast the luck!" said Mullins. "We mustn't risk it."

It looked as if Balham pondered and Anne's heart beat. She hoped Drummond's hired man had not told him much about Frank. After a moment or two he said:

"If we wanted to stay, you could not shove us out, ma'am, but we don't want to stop. We must see Mr. Gardiner before he goes to Montreal, and if we started now, we could get the train from the settlement to-morrow. The trouble is, all the money we have got will not buy our tickets to Winnipeg. If you'll lend us ten dollars, we will push off, and as soon as we're able we will pay you back."

"I do not carry money," Mrs. Drummond replied in a careless voice. "If you like to wait, you might ask my husband, but I doubt if you would persuade him."

Anne approved. If Balham imagined they expected Drummond, she hoped he would not stay. All the same, he might, and she must not risk his inquiring about Frank. Ten dollars was a useful sum, but so as she got rid of the fellows she would not grumble.

"If you engage to send the bills from Winnipeg, I will give you ten dollars," she said.

Going to the little room behind the kitchen, she noisily opened a drawer. Hugh's gun was in a corner and she pushed in two cartridges and rested the gun against the doorpost inside the room. The breach action's metallic snap was not unlike the noise a drawer lock made. Anyhow, now the gun was loaded she was happier. She knew Balham for a plausible scoundrel and she thought Mullins a sinister brute. Moreover, it looked as if the fellow indulged. For all the prohibition laws, horrible, crude spirit was smuggled into the prairie provinces, and Frank had talked about his trafficking in drugs. Although she thought him sober, he was somehow not normal.

There was another thing. Except for a few months in summer, one could not use the little room, and Hugh's desk was in the kitchen. A few small bills were in a pigeon-hole, and Anne hoped she might find ten dollars, because she did not want the men to see the wallet in which was the rather large sum that belonged to Frank. To force them to wait might excite their suspicion, and with pretended carelessness she went back to the kitchen.

Lifting the desk top, she pulled out two or three small greasy strips of paper. The Merchants' Bank, the Bank of British North America; in all five dollars. Anne firmly clenched the bills. Mullins must not see her hand shake.

"We haven't got the sum you want," she said. "On the plains, the storekeepers send in their accounts after harvest, and nobody uses much loose money. I hope five dollars is enough."

"I'm sorry it isn't," said Balham. "We are going to Winnipeg, and Canadian railroad companies sell their tickets for spot cash."

"Then you must wait for my husband," Mrs. Drummond rejoined. "He and the hired man ought soon to be back."

Balham smiled, meaningly.

"We must get the train to-morrow, and I reckon you're not keen for us to stop. Five dollars is a ridiculously small sum to keep at a farm, and I dare say Mrs. Nicol could find some more. In fact, we might help her search."

"That's the stuff," said Mullins. "Let's get on with it. Then I've walked far enough, and since we've started borrowing, we'll borrow a rig."

"One lame horse is in the corral and you could not catch him," said Anne in a scornful voice.

Balham turned to his confederate. "This job's mine; you won't meddle! Mrs. Nicol knows we'll send her back the bills. Now, ma'am, suppose you try to think where Mr. Nicol put his other wad?"

Anne dared not hesitate. To see the men go was worth paying for, and, propping up the desk top, she tossed about some implement catalogues, and pushed Harden's wallet under the articles. If she could squeeze back the fastening band, she might shake out two or three bills and guess their value by their size. The band stuck to the leather; in the narrow space she could not use her hands freely, and the wallet slipped about. Then a floor board cracked and she saw Mullins get up.

Seizing the wallet, Anne stepped back. Her fingers were behind the band, and she had unconsciously used some force. The cover at length swung open, and three or four large bills dropped out.

"You needn't bother to count," said Mullins. "We'll take them all."

Anne put her foot on the bills and braced her light body. The money was Frank's, and he had trusted Hugh to keep it safe for him. Her mouth went tight, she carried her head proudly, and almost forgot she was afraid. Balham signed his confederate to stop.

"Leave her alone! We are not asking for trouble."

"Ten dollars won't take us to Winnipeg, and if Gardiner's gone, we'll follow him to Montreal," Mullins rejoined.

The argument carried weight. Balham shrugged and Mullins advanced.

"Give me the wallet, you obstinate little slut!"

The blood leaped to Anne's skin. She was a Sahib's daughter and for long her ancestors had used command. Her unconscious pride revolted, and she gave the brute who threatened her a scornful glance.

"I will not. You might have had ten dollars. Now you will get none."

Mullins seized the wallet, which opened like a book. Anne held on, but he had seized the bottom cover and she the top, and when the pocket tore, the paper money was scattered about the boards. Mullins savagely threw her back. Anne reeled across the floor, but she knew where she was going, and when she struck the wall by the small room door she seized the gun behind the post. She pulled the hammers to full-cock, the butt went to her shoulder, and the long barrels pointed at Mullins' chest.

She had moved fast, but Mullins was faster. It was possible he thought she meant to shoot; Mrs. Drummond thought she meant to shoot. A big army revolver flashed and thin smoke floated across the room. Anne's gun crashed on the floor and for a moment or two she leaned against the wall. Then it looked as if her body crumpled, and she slipped sideways down the matchboards.

Mrs. Drummond jumped for the gun. Mullins gazed

dully at the fallen girl, and Balham, wrenching the revolver from him, threw him against the gauze door. That was all Mrs. Drummond really knew, for the wavering gun exploded and pungent smoke stung her eyes. The door clashed and all was quiet, but a large hole in the splintered matchboards marked where an ounce of shot had gone. Mrs. Drummond knelt on the floor and lifted Anne's head.

"They're gone," she said in a trembling voice. "Where were you hit, my dear?"

Anne said nothing. Her skin was very white, and a red stain that began near her neck spread fast across her clothes. Mrs. Drummond dared not move her and she went for a pillow and a blanket; and then, with a trembling hand, lighted an oil stove. There was no liquor in the house, but she might brew strong coffee, although it did not look as if the stimulant would be of much use to Anne.

XXV

HUGH TAKES THE TRAIL

ABOUT eleven o'clock Drummond and Hugh's hired man got back from the settlement. A thunderstorm had soaked their clothes, and since Drummond had thought he might be forced to stop for the night at the hotel, he had imagined Anne and Mrs. Drummond would go to bed. He was tired and wet, and to see the homestead windows shine was some relief, but when he pushed back the door he got a shock.

The small, hot kitchen smelt of kerosene, coffee, and the lingering fumes of smokeless powder. By the oil stove on the table was a torn pocket wallet on top of a loose pile of paper money; Mrs. Drummond, sitting on the boards, occupied a corner by an object covered by a thick blue blanket. Drummond saw a face as white as the pillow on which it rested and he stopped. His wife signed him to advance.

"She's shot. Two hoboes tried to steal Frank's money."

Anne slowly moved her head.

"They have not killed me, Adam. D'you think you could send for Hugh? Minnie durstn't move me, but the boards are hard."

"We will soon find Hugh, but we must first send for a doctor," said Drummond, as coolly as possible, and, going to the door, shouted for Hugh's hired man, Bill. Then he glanced at his wife. "Ought we not to carry her to bed?"

"You might try. I am not very large," said Anne.

Helped by the hired man, they pulled the blanket under her body, and Drummond and Bill took the ends. They moved gently, but when they put their load on the bed Anne was unconscious. Mrs. Drummond sent off Bill.

"You may not get a doctor for twenty-four hours, Adam. I'd like to know what you think."

She had cut Anne's clothes and she gently pulled back the stained material and a wet red bandage. Drummond saw a small hole in the white skin, a little below, and to one side of, Anne's neck. Then they very cautiously lifted her shoulders. On the other side was a larger, ragged hole. They lowered her down, and Drummond, bending his head, listened for her faint breathing. Putting back the wet cloth, he beckoned his wife to the kitchen.

"In a way, I reckon her luck was good. You know all I know about anatomy, but if her lungs were hurt, she would not breathe evenly—then the bullet went pretty high. Turned on a bone it pierced—shoulder blade I expect—and does not seem to have cut an important blood vessel. Her fainting might help stop the flow. When she comes round, a few spoonful of strong coffee might be useful. But who in thunder hurt her? She's such a little thing!"

"She's as brave as the bravest man I ever knew," Mrs. Drummond rejoined.

She briefly told him about Balham's demand and Anne's refusal. Drummond nodded and went for the coffee-pot.

"You can brew some more; the kettle's steaming. Have you got a flapjack, canned stuff, anything I can eat in about two minutes? Then I'll hustle back to the settlement."

Mrs. Drummond noted that water yet drained from his clothes and his soaked boots marked the floor. She knew her husband. Adam's talents were not superficially remarkable, but where one must front a strain he was competent.

"You are tired and wet, and I'd sooner you were about. Bill can go," she said.

"Bill is as tired and wet as I am, but I might see the way round an obstacle quicker than him," Drummond rejoined. "To begin with, we have to get the doctor, who is forty miles off up the line; and then I must send word to Hugh. They have only one telegraph operator and I don't know the company's rules, but if the boy's in bed I must yank him out and persuade him to get to work. The team have to stand for another trip."

Mrs. Drummond gave him food. After a minute or two he pushed away his plate and called the hired man.

"I doubt if the fellows who shot up Mrs. Nicol will come back, but they might," he said. "You have got a box of cartridges and your job's to hold the fort."

"I'd sure be pleased to meet them," said Bill. "If the d— hogs get through that door, somebody will be *carried* out."

Drummond nodded and Mrs. Drummond went back to Anne. She heard wheels rattle and the beat of horses' feet get faint. Rumbling thunder drowned the noise and tremendous rain swept the trembling roof.

In a shorter time than his wife had thought possible, Drummond brought the doctor, who, with some technical reservations, agreed about Anne's hurt. He was, however, forced to search for some splintered bone, and since dark had fallen when he arrived, he waited for morning. Before he was satisfied that all was extracted, Hugh and Harden reached the homestead and for a time waited anxiously. At length the doctor sent for Hugh.

"The wound ought not to give much trouble. Mrs. Nicol mainly needs careful nursing and Mrs. Drummond has engaged to stop as long as she can help. In half an hour you might go in for a few minutes, but I was forced

to use an anæsthetic. Sometimes the drug's effects are queer; I've known them disturbing."

Half an hour afterwards, Hugh was on his knees by the low bed and Anne's arm was round his neck.

"I am not going to die, but I dare say you would miss me if I went," she said. "In fact, I think I'll continue to bother you for some time."

"My dear!" said Hugh.

Anne's hand slackly pressed his mouth.

"Oh well, I'm rather glad. But you know you were bothered! You thought me small and fragile; you were afraid I'd get broken in Canada. I knew nothing that was useful; I was one of the idle rich. Anyhow, I was not rich, and sometimes you are rather a fool."

"It is very possible, little Anne. However, if I had thought all you think, I should not have carried you off."

"But you did not carry me off," said Anne. "At all events, I wanted to go, and I was not broken by work and thought. I expect an army revolver bullet would knock out a large man. To pretend is silly; you cannot cheat yourself and I have never cheated you. I forced you to take me to Canada; you are not the sort to find out that a woman is rasher than a man. In fact, your dullness in some things is annoying. But if you had left me at Thors-hope, I'd have broken my heart——"

She turned her head and frankly wept. For a minute or two Hugh waited, and then he firmly seized the little hand on his neck.

"You are all I want, Anne, and so long as I live and you live, I'll hold the finest thing I have got."

"Oh, well, that is something. However, the brutes who shot me are yet at large, and I feel they ought to be punished. They drove Frank to the madhouse and but for you he'd have drowned on Solway sands. Besides, I'm afraid they have not done with him."

"They hurt you, and if I can find them, they are going to pay. Now I know you will soon get better, I must take the trail."

Anne smiled, a faint smile.

"Yes, I think you ought to go, and I would not like to be the man you hunt. But Frank is rather a responsibility. His sort need a woman to take care of them, and since he has got Constance, I suppose he's lucky."

"Frank has another champion."

"Your modesty is notorious, but he has two. He really needs a governess. I don't know if my help was useful, and when you began to meddle you did so for Constance's sake. She, of course, has qualities I have not. For one thing, she's *domesticated*, and she certainly would not boil desiccated apples in a coal-oil can; but if you had married her, she'd have very gently but firmly steered you where you didn't want to go. She'd have seen you pulled off your ploughman's boots on the doorstep, you'd have had to put on fresh clothes for supper, and you would not have been allowed to smoke the dreadful tobacco you buy at the settlement. Discipline is good for Frank, but you would soon rebel."

Hugh laughed. "I was a raw farmer, Anne. I had not known a girl like Constance, and I did think her a model of all a thoroughbred young woman ought to be. Then I met another——"

Somebody tapped on the door, and the doctor came in. Anne frowned and asked:

"What do you want?"

"I must send off Mr. Nicol. You must rest."

"He is going. When will you be back?"

The doctor said he would, if possible, return in a week; he hoped he would not be needed afterwards. He had given Mrs. Drummond instructions and she was a competent nurse.

"Very well," said Anne and turned to Hugh. "You see, you have no grounds to be anxious, and you and Frank must follow the brutes at once. Since they shot me, he needn't hesitate, and I expect he'll be happy to get something of his own back."

Hugh thought the doctor looked puzzled.

"Are you sending your husband and Mr. Harden after the robbers?" he inquired. "Mr. Drummond has telegraphed for the police."

"They are going," Anne replied. "They are my men; Frank is something like a brother, and he is a Scottish Borderer. Hugh is English, Viking English, the best type in the Old Country. Of course, they are going! It looks as if you do not yet know us. I believe you really think us back numbers, and where you like us you try to remember that we have not your advantages. Well, you haven't a man in Canada who would go where my husband dare not."

"If you are a typical example, I admit English women have some sand," said the doctor soothingly. "Anyhow, I must send Mr. Nicol off, and unless you try to rest, I'll give you a sleeping draught."

Anne kissed Hugh. "Mullins and the other brute must be stopped. If you are forced, you must follow them to the frontier."

Hugh went, and by and by the doctor joined him in the kitchen.

"If your man will harness my team, I'll pull out," he said. "You haven't got to bother about Mrs. Nicol. After the anæsthetic, her mood is the sort of mood one expects." He mused for a few moments, and with a queer smile resumed: "*In vino veritas!* As a rule, a drug goes deeper than wine, and when our control is broken, forces that we normally hold down carry us along. Well, a doctor

and a priest must be discreet, but, if I am allowed, I might remark that you are lucky."

"You tell me nothing fresh," said Hugh. "I certainly have not studied psycho-analysis, but I imagine my wife's sub-conscious self is very like her usual self, and one who knew her declared she was a gallant little soul."

The doctor nodded. "There's another thing. You are resolved to get after the fellows who shot her up? Not my business, I allow; but the job is rather a job for the Royal North-West Police and the boys are jealous. Their superintendents will not stand for your carrying on a private feud. If you pull a gun on the robbers, you must account for it to a judge."

"Quite," said Hugh, smiling. "I expect the law does not require a citizen to stand while another shoots at him. The troopers certainly know their job, but there are not many of them and the plains are wide. For all I know, the superintendent Drummond wired must consult with Regina, and when the boys arrive the trail will be cold. But I must see my team yoked and put up some food."

Half an hour afterwards, he stole to the window of the little room. Anne's head was turned the other way; all he could see was the small quiet figure on the bed and it looked as if she slept. Treading cautiously, Hugh crossed the veranda to the steps where his team waited, and he and Harden got on board. A tent, two thick blankets and some food were packed in the bottom of the wagon, and Harden sat on the pile. Neither he nor Hugh carried a gun.

"You are going north?" he said. "The railroad is the other way."

"That is so. I understand Balham and his pal left most of the money on the floor."

Harden nodded. He had sympathetically indulged Hugh's preoccupation about Anne, and taking it for granted that they would try to find the men, he had al-

lowed him to fix their line. To some extent his doing so was typical.

"So far as I can reckon, all they got away with was eight or nine dollars. Mrs. Drummond thinks one stated they had five dollars of their own."

"But you know the sum she picked up, and you ought to know the value of your wad."

"I do not," said Harden. "I am not as methodical as you. I know how much I got at the bank, but sometimes I took out a small bill for cigarettes and so forth. Anyhow, when the swine made the homestead they were nearly broke, and I think Balham frankly stated the situation; they must get to Winnipeg before Mark went. Well, one must try to be just. Their object was not robbery, but the wallet tempted them, and Mullins, in a manner, lost his head. But for Anne, he might have had the lot, and although I expect he had not meant to use his gun she got yours. Then, in a sort of panic, he jumped for the door; his nerve, no doubt, was broken by dope. Besides, Mrs. Drummond had seized the gun. In fact, she shot the wall. Before he could pick up the scattered bills he must shoot her, and Balham would not stand for it. She thinks he threw Mullins out."

"Yes," said Hugh, "I expect it happened as you state. The important thing is, their capital will not carry them to Winnipeg. Canadian short-distance fares are high. Anyhow, they'd reckon on our watching the stations and using the telegraph. In consequence, they'll shove north, away from the settlements. They might get food and perhaps a job, because some time might go before news about the shooting reaches the back-block farms."

Harden pondered and looked about. The sun was scorching and when he touched a bolt head in the wagon top the iron stung his hand. All the same, he noted the round, lead-colored clouds that massed along the horizon,

and an ominous yellow tone in the piercing light. Distant bluffs were harshly blue; every pinnacle on their uneven tops cut the sky, but reflections trembled at their feet, as if they were islands in a dazzling sea. A cloud of flies followed the horses and sometimes one heard a mosquito drone. When the fierce sun sank Harden imagined the thirsty swarms would torment man and beast. Well thunder rain might drown the brutes, and Hugh was not the sort to bother about a storm. Harden shrugged. After all, to camp under the wagon in the dripping grass would not hurt him much.

"I think Balham and Mullins will steer for Winnipeg as soon as possible," he said. "They must get money, and they durst not hold a job for long. The frontier is not far from Winnipeg, and if they could steal across to Dakota, they'd perhaps be safe."

"Do you think they could force Gardiner to give them money?"

Harden frowned and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I'm frankly puzzled, Hugh. At one time, I thought their hoping to make Mark pay for me a first-class joke. Now the thing begins to look less humorous."

"There is an explanation," Hugh remarked. "Your relation might be willing to pay for himself."

"Looks plausible," said Harden. "All the same, it will not go. When I try to solve the puzzle I stop where I stopped before; Mark is not the sort that runs away. He's a full-blooded, obstinate, pugnacious animal."

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "if Balham does risk a push for Winnipeg, he'll circle west for the other branch railroad. He must get food, and if we inquire at the homesteads, we ought to hit his track. In the meantime, we must try to make Hunter's by dark."

He concentrated on his driving. The wagon rocked and flies hovered about the horses like swarming bees.

XXVI

MULLINS WINS THE FIRST ROUND

HUGH soon found, and lost, Balham's trail. A bachelor farmer told him two strangers had asked for a job and after sawing a quantity of wood had stopped for the night. In the morning he gave them three dollars and a small piece of rather old salt pork. When Hugh inquired if that was all the food they carried off, Hunter said he thought his flour bag was not as full as it ought to be and some sugar and tea was gone. He knew nothing about the shooting. One did not get rich by loafing around the settlement, he remarked, and he and his neighbors went there about once a month for grub.

The inference was plain; other farmers would not have heard that Anne was shot and the fugitives might, without much risk, claim hospitality. Hunter remarked that he had thought one of his visitors, the short, yellow man, something of a tough, but it did not bother him. He had no money at the homestead and he reckoned nobody would steal a plough.

Hugh pushed on for the next farm, but its occupant had not seen a stranger for three or four weeks. On the prairie, population follows the railroads and when one goes back one soon reaches a belt from which wheat cannot be profitably hauled. In consequence, only a few poor and adventurous settlers locate in the distant townships, and Hugh had thought to get news of Balham would not be hard. Yet, so far as he could find out, nobody had asked for food, and trusting his luck and Harden's persua-

sion that the fellow would circle back to Winnipeg, he steered west for a branch railroad that left the Pacific track for some distance from the line near his farm.

"If they expect to cheat the police, they must get money," Harden argued. "Mark, so to speak, is their last hope. To buy a ticket might be risky, and they are not in funds, but I believe it's possible to steal a ride in a freight car, particularly on a branch line."

The day was hot, and when rain did not fall the sun was scorching. At night thunder rolled about the sky. In the sultry heat one could not sleep in a tent, and for all the smudge fire's smoke, mosquitoes swarmed about the camp under the wagon. Sometimes Harden woke, half suffocated by the stinking smoke, and when the vapor floated the other way he fought the droning hosts and swore. To reflect that Mullins had not a wagon nor a tent was some comfort, and in the dark the bloodthirsty insects might not know the brute was soaked by dope. Then the smoke drifted back across him, the horrible pricking stopped and he was asleep.

They started while the morning was comparatively cool and did not grumble when a shower soaked their thin clothes. The rain was refreshing, but after it stopped, the sun pierced the clouds and the heat got almost insupportable. The horses tired, and although they nooned for two hours in the shade of a bluff, about four o'clock they began to look for a spot to camp.

Since ten o'clock they had not seen a homestead. One or two were somewhere about, but Hugh, urged by Harden, had kept his line to the west. The bluffs that dotted the plain cut one's view, and although one imagined the grass level, it gently rolled. At some spots, water sparkled in the shallow hollows where the grass was long, and when he saw a row of poplars by a creek Hugh got down and loosed his team. The horses needed a drink and

would keep the shade, and a light wind that sprang up ought to banish the flies. When he had smoked his pipe, he rather languidly got on his feet.

"I'll follow the *coulée* to the rise," he said. "The ground is pretty high, and if there is a farm in the neighborhood, I ought to see it. Are you going?"

"Certainly not," said Harden. "I am not a locomotive, and on our line a locomotive is allowed to rest after thirty miles."

When Hugh left him he reflected that he had not for two or three nights taken off his clothes. A frontiersman ought not to be fastidious, but he might at all events wash his shirt, and if the shirt looked better afterwards, he could experiment on his overall trousers. To wash clothes was not an exhausting job and one could get the soap out by trampling them with one's feet. He must, however, find a spot where the water was not muddy and the bottom was hard.

Before he was satisfied he followed the creek for five or six hundred yards; and then saw it fed a small lake, which some willows had hidden. A light wind rippled the sparkling water and Harden had another happy thought; while his clothes dried he would go for a swim. As a rule, a prairie lake is shallow and the bottom is soft, but he could swim in two or three feet and anyhow he could float.

Harden industriously rubbed and trampled his clothes; and then, hanging trousers and shirt on the willows, started for the lake. All he now wore was his battered Stetson hat. The lake bottom was as soft as he had thought and for twenty yards he ploughed through sticky mud, but at length he pulled out his feet and taking a flat plunge, found that he could swim. The slightly alkaline water soothed his bitten skin like bath salts, and stopped the horrible tickling at his wrists and neck. Splendid! He

must use the crawl stroke and wash out the sandflies he thought yet lurked in his hair.

At the other side of the lake he turned on his back and floated luxuriously. At length, he was cool and comfortable. The irritation that follows a mosquito bite does not spread far round the perforated spot, but when sandflies bit his head somehow all his body felt unclean. Harden looked up. White clouds floated smoothly across the sky. There was not going to be a thunderstorm, and he must wait for his shirt. On a scorching afternoon he would sooner swim about a rather muddy lake than beat off flies in the shade. Besides, if you sat under a tree when the wind shook the branches, a bug that lurked about the leaves fell down your neck and leeches you horribly. Harden admitted he began to talk, and sometimes to think, like a Canadian frontiersman.

For a time he swam and floated happily; and then he thought he heard the horses move about the spot where Hugh had pitched camp. They stamped and trampled as if somebody forced them backwards, and a steel clevis jingled on a musical note. Harden thought it strange. Hugh had told him they were going to stop for the night, and if he had afterwards resolved to push on, he would shout. Nobody shouted, but a fresh noise seemed to indicate that somebody lifted a wagon pole and threw harness across the horses' backs.

Thin willows cut Harden's view and he swam for a gap where he hoped to see the camp, and getting on his feet looked about with puzzled surprise. Two men harnessed the horses. One's back was turned towards Harden, but he was not Hugh; the other was behind the team and all one could see was his legs. For a moment Harden wondered whether Hugh had come back with a farmer he had met, but he began to think the men were awkward. In fact, it looked as if the fellow on the near side did not

know how to fasten the double reins. Then the horses would not stand quietly, as they stood for Hugh.

Harden began to see a light, and when a short, thick man joined the other he ploughed as fast as possible through the holding mud. There was not much use in his shouting; Ballham meant to steal the team. All Harden could do was to try to reach the camp before the team was yoked. Double, pole harness is puzzling for a man who does not know where the straps fasten, and Harden imagined he might arrive in useful time; but if he engaged in a roughhouse scrimmage naked he would be at some disadvantage, and he must get some clothes. Kicking off lumps of gumbo mud, he sped across the grass.

His shirt had dried and although it stuck to his damp skin he dragged it on. His overall trousers were crumpled and twisted where he had wrung out the water, and the material perhaps had shrunk, for his muddy foot would not go through the leg. Balancing on the other foot, he tugged with all his force, but the damp cloth clung about his toes and he rolled down the bank.

Harden tore off the entangling garment and jumped to his feet. If he stopped to straighten the crumpled legs the team would be gone. Clenching his fists and pushing back his head he started, as he had started from a back mark at a college hurdle race.

His shirt blew behind him like a flag, his white legs shone in the brushing grass, and it looked as if the men he hoped to stop marked his impetuous advance. One, stretched across a plunging horse's back, was strenuously occupied. The reins perhaps had got beneath a strap where they ought to be on top, and unless one knew how they crossed, the double leads were baffling. Harden thought he had yet a fighting chance, particularly if the man fell off the horse. The other climbed the wheel and hoarsely cursed his awkward companion.

Harden's head went farther back and his nostrils expanded. Although his breath was labored, he had got his proper stride. Moreover, he could keep it up for two or three minutes and he had but a hundred yards to go. His legs flashed through the grass, and where a badger's tunnel opened in his path he hurled himself across in a six-foot leap. Fifty yards to go, and the team had not started. Now for the savage, straining effort that carried one over the judge's tape! His heart thumped, his sight was blurred, but he was going to win.

Balham, on the horse's back, got his knee on the pole, reached for the wagon front, and swung himself across. The horses kicked, the wagon rocked, and Mullins used the whip. Since Hugh seldom did so, had the team been fresh, Mullins might not have stopped on board. A Clover leaf wagon is light and narrow, and carried on thin, high wheels.

The horses started. Harden, straining and gasping, steered obliquely for their heads. If he could seize the bit links he might stop them; he might manage to get on the pole and crawl to the wagon. Mullins, standing upright, swung the whip and the stinging lash fell across Harden's thinly-covered back. Pain and fury broke his control. His head swam, his judgment went, and when he jumped for the near horse's head he fell against the animal's shoulder. His luck perhaps was good, for he was not conscious of purposeful effort, but when he rolled in the grass the battering hoofs were a yard off, and the wheels did not touch him. He vaguely thought Mullins leaned down; a burning pain shot through his naked legs, and for some moments that was all he knew.

Kneeling in the grass, he dully looked about. Two hundred yards off, the wagon rocked and jolted and Balham swayed to and fro on the spring seat. The team crashed through the short scrub behind the little wood, as if they

took their own line, independent of their driver. Mullins yet flogged them savagely and Harden hoped they would jolt the fellow overboard. Then his eyes shut, he clenched his fist, and fought the faintness that sprang from shock and pain.

When he was a little steadier, he pulled back his shirt and saw across his legs and body two long reddish-purple marks. He had willingly risked a knock out and perhaps a pistol shot, but the brutes had used a whip and beaten him like a dog! Rage and humiliation came near to carrying him away; his impulse was to chase the wagon until he dropped. Reason conquered, and by and by he got on his feet. Somebody shouted, and he saw Hugh push through the bushes by the wood.

Hugh stopped. Half a mile off, the wagon rolled up the *coulée's* low bank and vanished. There was nothing to be done, and joining Harden he studied him with rather grim curiosity. Frank's hair was wet and from his knees downwards his legs were mottled by chocolate-colored mud. Hugh did not yet see the purple marks; Harden awkwardly pulled down his shirt in order that he might not.

"The afternoon is hot and I suppose you went for a swim?" Hugh remarked. "In the meantime, Balham and Mullins stole my team. It looks as if they stole our blankets, tent, and food!"

"You're entitled to swear," said Harden. "If you try to be humorous, I'll not engage to be calm."

"I have known you calmer, and if there is a joke, it's the other fellow's," Hugh rejoined. "To catch and harness the horses would occupy them for some time. I don't see why in thunder you allowed them to get away!"

Harden rather cautiously sat down. He doubted if he could yet bear his clothes and the cool grass soothed his

smarting skin. As calmly as possibly, he narrated his efforts to stop the thieves.

"I expect they crept up behind the trees while I was in the lake," he said. "Mullins has won the first round. In the circumstances, to boast would be ridiculous."

"But the fight is not yet over?"

"Oh, well, I carry Mullins' mark, and as long as I can use my feet I'll follow the swine. Sooner than he should get away, I'd walk to the frontier."

Hugh smiled, a queer, crooked smile.

"He marked you; he shot Anne. If it would help, I'd walk to the Gulf of Mexico. But let's be practical. A good team is much faster than a man, but when we get back to the settlements we might hire a car. At the top of the rise I saw a homestead. We ought to make it by supper time, and I dare say we can persuade the fellow to loan us his rig."

Harden went for his clothes, and when he came back he said:

"Now I think about it, Balham may not get very far. He cannot drive and I doubt if the harness is properly put on. If he tries to cross a ravine, I expect, and sincerely hope, he'll capsize the wagon."

"That's something," said Hugh. "The homestead is five miles off, and we ought to start."

XXVII

THE BROKEN WHEEL

THE small log homestead rose starkly from the level grass. Behind it was an oblong of brown summer fallow, and then a belt of wheat, in which the fading green was touched by yellow and pale red. In the background, dark clouds massed. The evening was hot, the wind had dropped, and big drops began to fall.

Harden did not know if the door was locked, but a large screw was driven through the boards, and he had found the double windows were fastened inside. The small, turf stable was far from clean. To get there had cost him something and he used caution when he sat down on the steps. After a few moments he savagely slapped his cheek and rubbed a red smear from his hand.

"Got that brute!" he said. "You begin to hear their bugles; they'll soon roll up for a mass attack, and we must dig in. Where d'you think the fellow who owns the house has gone?"

"Visiting a pal fifty miles off; Saskatoon perhaps for a holiday," Hugh replied. "He has got a partner and I reckon them hustlers."

"It's possible. In the Northwest hustlers are pretty numerous, and some are not content to hustle themselves. By how d'you know?"

"Look at the wheat. Could you have sown that crop?"

"I certainly could not," said Harden. "You might. But get on with the argument; I expect the wheat is not all. Until the mosquitoes get properly busy, I'm willing to rest and smoke."

He lighted a cigarette, and Hugh resumed :

"You perhaps noted four stalls in the stable? A man cannot, at one time, drive two teams, and one does not feed more horses than one expects to use."

"Quite sound! I wondered whether we might camp in a stall, but to clean another fellow's stable gratuitously is unthinkable, and since the hustlers have left theirs alone for some time, we mightn't be through by dark. All the same, we must get in somewhere."

Hugh agreed. The evening was the sort of evening in which mosquitoes make life a burden.

"The screw rather indicates that the fellows have lost the key. They might, of course, have carried off the screw driver, but I doubt. If they have gone different ways, one might be back before the other; when you have occupied a twenty-foot shack with the same partner for twelve months, you find a fresh companion for a holiday. In consequence, I expect the screw driver is not far off. Suppose you get up and kick the steps?"

Harden did so, and lifted a loose board.

"Yes, you're logical," he said and picked up the tool.

The door was soon opened and Harden looked about the room. He saw a rusty stove, a frypan holding coagulated grease, dirty cooking pots, old overalls, and some broken long boots. Hugh remarked that the logs of which the house was built were, for the Western plains, unusually thick and straight, and that the hollows in the corduroy surface had been neatly *chinked* with a mortar of moss and clay. A rude ladder went up to a bedroom in the roof.

"A stout frontiersman does not worry about a little untidyness, but I think I'll inspect the bunks," Harden remarked. "The grease in the spider has, no doubt, been pretty frequently used?"

"It looks, and smells, like that," Hugh agreed.

Harden crossed the floor and picked up an ornamental can.

"Somebody's American Axleine for patent hubs! Guaranteed a smooth and lasting lubricant, and the screw top ought to baffle the germs. I'll anoint myself while you look for some food."

He went up the ladder and Hugh lighted the wood in the stove. The little room got very hot, but he fried a large quantity of bacon and a pile of flapjacks he thought would support two people for twenty-four hours. The smell of coffee called Harden down the ladder.

"Railroad *colonist* mattresses; I believe you get them for a dollar and a *hafe*," he said. "The stuffing has been changed, and since the leading smell is wild peppermint, I expect it's prairie hay."

"Were you satisfied with the Axleine?" Hugh inquired.

"So far," said Harden guardedly. "In the Northwest you mustn't grumble about a grease stain on your clothes, and I can at all events bear to touch my legs."

Hugh gave him food and coffee, and raked out the stove, but for all the rain that beat the roof, the little room was like a Turkish bath. The bedroom, which the stove pipe crossed, was hotter, and some time went before the smell of peppermint soothed them to sleep.

In the morning they cleaned the pans and plates they had used, and Hugh, putting some paper money on the table, fastened the door. The day was cooler and a fresh wind dried the grass, but they saw nobody, and when the faint wheelmarks they had followed vanished, it looked as if they were first who had ever crossed the quiet plain. About three o'clock in the afternoon, they stopped by a creek. The slow stream curved in sinuous loops at the bottom of a hollow like a railroad cutting. Tangled willows, wild currants, and small poplars covered the steep banks, and the wavy line of timber went back as far as one

could see. A man might force his way through the scrub; a team could not.

"The stream goes north, into the wilds by the Reindeer lakes and on to Hudson's Bay," said Hugh. "Our creeks run south to the Assiniboine, and we are farther from the railroad than I thought. The creek, however, cuts Balham's line. He might find a draw, and the fellow at whose farm we stopped must know where a team can cross."

"North or south?" said Harden. "If we go the wrong way, we might lose the brutes for good."

Hugh pondered. He had not much to go upon, but after a minute or two he got on his feet.

"In doubt, try the hardest plan. We'll steer north," he said.

At five o'clock they saw a gap in the timber. Somebody had chopped the trees and thrown the thin logs across the creek. The trail went down obliquely between the stumps and brush, and at the bottom there was an awkward turn to the bridge. In the brush at one side they saw the wheels of a capsized wagon. Harden plunged down the trail; Hugh followed soberly. He did not see a dead horse, and that was something.

When they stopped and examined the ground, to picture the accident was not hard. The driver had not tried, or was unable, to hold his horses on the hill, and seeing he could not take the corner, had steered for the brush. He had meant to take the high side, but the animals had refused, and the wagon had gone backwards down the sharp incline. A wheel was broken and an axle was bent. Hugh noted the cut harness and clenched his fist. Harden gave him a sympathetic nod.

"The fool did not bear the team down the hill. Then it's possible the cross reins were not properly fixed. After the smash, they used the knife rather generously, but the

harness was not theirs and they refused to risk a kick. The blankets and tent and food are gone."

"The horses are gone," said Hugh. "I expect the fellows loaded up the stuff and rode."

He began to fill his pipe. Harden laughed.

"The swine certainly cannot drive, and when you have stirrups and a good saddle, your first ride is not at all a joyous experience. A tenderfoot is nothing to a tenderloin, and if Balham stuck on for two or three hours, he'd, no doubt, need a large can of axle grease. But d'you know where we are?"

"Balham's in front, and if we swing southwest, we will at some time cut the railroad," Hugh replied. "Just now, mosquitoes are a nuisance anywhere, but they're thickest and fiercest about woods and creeks. For all that, you cannot without a blanket, sleep in wet grass, and you cannot sleep at all without a smudge fire. We need dead wood, and branches for beds, and both are here. The night is not going to be a tranquil night, but we'll get to work."

Since he had no axe, they were occupied for some time, and then he brewed tea in a meat can he had brought from the farm, and divided the flapjacks and cold bacon; one portion for supper and the other for breakfast. They must he said, trust their luck for lunch.

They had pitched camp three or four hundred yards from the trees, but when the sun got low and the wind dropped, the mosquitoes' ominous drone disturbed the evening calm. Hugh threw green stuff on the dead-wood fire, and lighting their pipes, they sat in the acrid smoke. By and by the sunset melted and in the dark the gathering swarms got savage. Sometimes the smoke went straight up and to endure the bites was torture; by contrast, when the hot, steamy haze rolled back, to cough and gasp was some relief.

The night got cold, but Harden used his jacket to cover his neck and head. The mosquitoes fastened on his wrists, and small creeping things from the poplar branches invaded his clothes. Sometimes for a few minutes his brain got dull and he imagined he fought an intolerable nightmare. Then the choking smoke roused him and he knew the horror real. Three or four hours of torment went. He had thought sleep impossible, but when Hugh pushed him and he looked up he saw the sun was rising.

A keen wind touched his fevered skin and the mosquitoes were gone. He was cramped and cold, and his hip joints ached. He hated to feel his shirt touch his neck, and red bands marked his wrists. Hugh's face was spotted and his look was rather grin. The fire yet burned and he pushed the meat can into the glowing ash.

"Pretty fierce!" said Harden. "Have you known them worse? However, when a tenderfoot inquires, I expect the convention is to state he does not yet begin to know mosquitoes can bite."

"For the high plains, I really think they were near the limit, but in some British Columbian muskegs a white man cannot live for a night," Hugh replied. "We must get breakfast and shove off. I hope our next stop is at a homestead."

For the first half-hour Harden's advance was labored. He felt as if he had got sciatica, but he had known the gnawing pain in France, and the sun soon dried his clothes and warmed his cramped body. They did not see a homestead, and in the afternoon he was conscious of a fresh pain, in his left side. To front the mosquitoes for another night was, however, unthinkable and he resolutely pushed on. At length they found wheel marks going west, and by and by another row joined the first.

"A wagon implies a homestead," Harden remarked. "We might follow back the ruts."

"Our plan's to shove ahead, and I expect the teamsters were going to a settlement," said Hugh. "If we find a third track, we'll know."

A third track, and then another, converged upon their path, for a prairie trail grows as a river grows, by feeding tributaries, until the torn grass vanishes and a wide riband gently curves across the waste. In the wilds, man mechanically takes the easy line and his paths, like the animals' path, are not straight. The sun had dried the gumbo, and the soil shone silver gray in the reflected light. The trail obviously went to a settlement, but nothing indicated how far the settlement was.

Harden had slept in the grass for one night and had had enough. Besides, if one arrives at a prairie hotel when supper is over, one must wait for breakfast. Money will not bribe cook and waitress to serve a fresh meal. In the circumstances, Frank made the best speed he could. The pain in his left side got worse, his boots galled his feet, and his clothes had for some time galled his skin.

At length, he saw a windmill pump behind a gray-green sweep of willows, and soon afterwards, small houses in the trees. When they got nearer he noted a livery stable, an implement yard, and a rather ambitious clapboard hotel. But for three or four houses with verandas screened like a meat-safe by mosquito gauze, that was all. The little frame houses, as usual in the West, were all on one side of the trail, perhaps because where settlements spring by the railroads sober citizens do not for some time locate across the track. By tradition, the other side belongs to the people their wives would refuse to meet.

A high plank sidewalk bordered the wheel-torn street, and one went up four or five steps to the hotel veranda. In a dark passage, a row of tin basins and a large water can occupied a shelf. The three or four towels were wet and Harden imagined had not for some time been white.

He, however, had conquered his fastidiousness, and the water in the can was clean.

When he joined the group in the bleak, hot dining-room his face and hair were wet. One or two gave him a nod, but nobody talked. The men's object was to satisfy their appetite, and in the West one concentrates on one's job. Moreover, twenty minutes after she had rung the bell the waitress would firmly put them out. When Hugh was allowed two or three extra minutes he imagined it was rather for Harden's sake than because he himself had arrived late; he certainly had not been three times supplied with coffee at a black-block hotel before. Sometimes he wondered whether Constance approved the rather puzzling attraction for young women Frank, perhaps unconsciously, used.

In the evenings, the hotel veranda is the settlement's club, and when Hugh followed the group to the bench along the wall he got news. Since the village was farther back than the telephones went, the men knew nothing about the hold-up at his house, but they were rather excited about recent events. The trail to the railroad, they stated, was pretty good; moreover, if one took the proper fork, it joined the end of a graded road about thirty miles off. In consequence, an adventurous peddler, selling door-springs and so forth, had reached the spot in his Hupmobile. He parked the car at the livery yard, and nobody heard her start, but when the livery man got up she was gone.

The peddler hired a rig and started for the railroad in order to telegraph the police. The implement smith got on his motorcycle and searched the neighborhood. He found, and lost, the marks of automobile tires, but, so far as he could distinguish, the car had not made the graded road.

"You rode your bicycle sixty miles along a trail like that?" Harden exclaimed.

"I came off five times and I pushed her some, but I got there and back," the smith replied.

"What a man has done another can do," Harden remarked, and gave Hugh a meaning glance. "I suppose somebody stole the car. Was anybody you did not know about?"

"The drummer was the only stranger we have seen for most a month," said the livery man. "When I went to bed his car was standing right behind my feed barn; when I got up she wasn't; but that's not all. In the morning Neilson from Birch Lake came along and brought two horses he found outside his place. He reckoned I might know them, but I hadn't seen the span before. The queer thing was, some fellow had cut and tied their driving reins for bridles."

Harden laughed. "I imagined Mullins would soon have enough and it's some comfort to think he and the other could not get a hot bath. The horses are ours, and the fellows who stole them stole the drummer's car. Are you going to the stable, Hugh?"

All went. The livery man admitted the animals knew their master, and Hugh told his tale.

"At sun-up I'll hire the lightest rig you have got," he said.

"I see another plan," said Harden. "Sixty miles in a day would beat your team. I think we will hire the motorcycle."

Hugh hesitated. In the back townships, a graded road is a road where turf and soil is spread in the hollows and stable sweepings are used to bind the sandy belts. For some time, it is rougher than a good grass trail. Yet a motorcycle was faster than a team.

"If we can agree, I'll take your wheel. I am willing to hand the hotel keeper a sum for guarantee," he said to the smith.

"You can have her," said the smith. "Since the fellows shot up your wife, they sure ought to be caught, and so long as you pay for all you break, I'll be satisfied. Now we'll go see she's all right and load up some juice."

They went. The bicycle was a large red machine, and Harden's eyes sparkled.

"Fifty, and then some, if you hustle her?" he remarked.

"She might," the smith agreed. "I haven't yet hit a piece of road where I could let her out. But you have to remember you pay for all you break."

"You're a sport," said Harden. "If she gets hurt and we survive, I'll buy you the fastest wheel that ever wore war paint."

He beckoned Hugh, and ten minutes after they got back to the hotel was tranquilly asleep. For a time Hugh smoked his pipe and studied a map in a railroad folder.

XXVIII

HARDEN FINDS THE CAR

BY a long bluff the trail went down an incline and Harden thought it went round the wood, but the trees cut his view. Moreover, broken roots and holes were numerous, and he dared not look about. With Hugh jolting on the pillion, a sharp swerve might be dangerous.

Harden's eyes were dazzled, and his body hurt at several different spots, for although they had not yet gone thirty miles he had come off four times. On the beaten trail the gumbo had baked in gray ridges that reflected the light. So long as the machine ran smoothly, Harden could see where he went, but where she advanced by shattering jumps the ground tossed like waves at sea.

Dust leaped about the wheels and settled on his skin and clothes; the exhaust's explosive blasts pierced a trailing cloud. Harden thought the track did go round the wood; at the corner he must swing wide. Since Hugh began to be annoyed when they were last flung off, he hoped they would not hit a bush. All the same, his orders were to shove along, and he let her go.

Swinging round the curve, he saw two horses about ten yards in front. Behind the horses, a man swayed about on a high seat. The picture, however, was indistinct, and in the background blurred trees revolved. Harden cut out his engine and went for the wood; because he had banked sharply, he dared not turn the other way. He heard somebody swear and the startled horses plunge, but he had missed them by a foot or two, and it looked as if the bicycle jumped a bush. Anyhow, green branches smashed,

and he was on his back in the wild currants. He did not know where the bicycle was and he hesitated to get up.

After three or four minutes Hugh pulled him up. Hugh's face was spotted with blood and his thin jacket had split at a seam. Harden cautiously stretched his arms and legs, and although they hurt, imagined none was broken.

"If I could get a snappy drink, I believe I'd soon be all right," he said. "You have got a scratch, but to throw you off a house would not hurt you much. Did you happen to see where the bicycle went?"

"She's in the bushes behind you. Come on and help me lift her," Hugh replied.

To drag the machine from the bush occupied them for two or three minutes, and then a tall, muscular fellow arrived. His face was red, as if he had run from the spot where his horses were tied, and he carried a large whip.

"Be a sport," said Harden. "Help us shove her to the trail."

"I want to know where you got her," the other rejoined.

"D'you think we stole her?" Harden inquired in an ominously quiet voice.

"Looks as if you might. Anyhow, I know that wheel, and she isn't yours."

"If you were not a fool, you'd know the safest time to annoy a man is not when he's just been thrown into a currant bush. I'd sooner be polite, but I think that's all."

Hugh signed Harden to be quiet, and turning to the farmer, pulled out a packet of American cigarettes.

"Suppose you sit down and take a smoke? We were willing to hire the wheel, but when the smith knew why we wanted her he would not take our money. Since you might help us, I will put you wise."

"Why, that's all right!" said the other when Hugh stopped. "You see, I heard somebody had stolen the

drummer's car, and it looked as if the fellows had come back for Tom's bicycle. Well, I was at the railroad, and no strangers got on board a train. Tom searched the main trail where everybody goes; my notion is, you want to take the other where they don't. Now and then she peters out, but if you keep your line southwest, you'll pick her up again and make the railroad near Smallwood, which is nearly thirty miles from the depot we use."

He gave them some directions, helped to push the bicycle to the trail, and went off. For two or three minutes Harden experimented with the machine.

"By the time we have done with her, her rosy bloom will need retouching; but the breed's a hardy breed, and her complexion does not matter so long as her heart is right," he said. "Well, I think we might risk it."

The engine throbbed, the bicycle jolted across torn birch roots, plunged into some holes, and when the trees rolled back leaped ahead. Harden remarked in a breathless gasp that the proper time to think about an obstacle was when you were across. Hugh stubbornly held on. The bicycle was faster than a rig. He thought Frank joyously flung her across baked gumbo blocks and tangled grass. The folks who thought the Scots sober and cautious did not know Harden's sort.

Sometimes, however, they were forced to stop, for Harden admitted a plunge down the bank of a wooded ravine might be rash, and the bicycle refused, without some help, to climb the precipitous trail on the other side. Where it was possible, he steadied her by his braced leg, while Hugh, trampling in the dust, gasped and shoved. For an hour they labored across a sand belt in the scorching sun; here and there on the high plains sandhills roll like the dunes by a windy beach. The trail, marked by hollows where wheels had sunk, went up and down, and on the steepest pitches somebody had scattered stable manure.

At one spot the manure was fresh, and when the front wheel skidded in the greasy stuff Harden went under the capsized machine.

Afterwards, for the most part, they manhandled the heavy bicycle up the slopes, but sometimes Harden balanced on the tank, where his feet could reach the ground, and Hugh labored in the sand the churning wheel threw back. All the same, they got up, and when they rejoined the gumbo trail he swung about on the pillion and fought for breath.

In the afternoon the faint trail vanished, and steering by the sun, they took the grass. Hugh reckoned they had gone sixty miles and the bicycle had beaten the best a team could do. But for a few scattered bluffs, the plain was as lonely as the sea. Sometimes a prairie chicken sprang from the grass, and sometimes a gopher plunged into a hole. When they went rocking past a bluff, he thought a coyote stole away into the shade, but for some time afterwards all he saw was sky and grass.

At length, Harden shouted, and Hugh, leaning sideways, looked in front. Two or three miles off, something shone and vanished like a signal lamp.

"A car d'you think? The sun on the screen?" he said. "But where is she gone?"

"We are running down a slight incline," Harden replied.

Hugh agreed. Although the plain looked level, the ground gently rolled, and the shining object was now perhaps behind the rise in front. For a few minutes he must wait, but when they reached the top a broad shadow trailed across the waste.

"Oh, blast the cloud!" said Harden. "If the fellows saw us and we don't spot them soon, they might steal away."

The cool, gray belt got narrower and melted, and something sparkled dazzlingly.

"She's stopped," said Harden. "If they are waiting for us, we'll humor them. Hold tight!"

The jolting machine went faster. The car's stopping was ominous, and since Mullins carried an army revolver, a frontal attack might be rash. Unless one is a first-class pistol shot, to hit a rapidly-moving target, however, is hard, and until they were twenty yards off, a shot might be risked. Besides, they did not yet know who was on board.

Snorting explosively, the bicycle leaped ahead. Harden's habit was not to ponder. In front the enemy waited, and he took the challenge. On the whole, Hugh agreed. The brutes had shot little Anne, but his only weapon was a pocket knife, and he would sooner have carried a choke-bore gun loaded with double B's.

The bright spot got larger and he saw metal shine. In another few moments he saw nobody was in the car; but if one lay in the grass, one could steady the short pistol barrel on one's left arm.

"Go straight for the screen; then swerve and drive round her," he said.

The bright reflections dazzled him, and he leaned hard across. The bicycle banked sharply, circled the car, and stopped. Nobody was under the car, and so far as Hugh could see, nobody was in the neighborhood. Harden clenched his fist.

"The d— swine are gone," he gasped.

Hugh pulled out a cigarette and sat down on the running-board.

"I suppose the car is the stolen car and they would stick to her as long as she would go. You might investigate. I'd begin at the tank."

"Quite," said Harden. "All the same, I'll pull off the engine cover."

For two or three minutes he was occupied; and then he rejoined Hugh.

"Yes, I expect she stopped when the juice ran out. But where d'you think the swine have gone? And where do you think we are?"

Hugh had, four or five minutes since, remarked a long dark smear that moved slowly across the horizon.

"We are about eight miles from the railroad. *Swine* begins to get monotonous. For a change, you might use the North American hog."

"No," said Harden, as if he pondered. "Hog stands for a grossly selfish brute. The other indicates somebody altogether and unthinkably foul, for example, Mullins. Well, I expect we ought to start for the railroad and telegraph the police, but I'd like five minutes for a smoke."

An hour afterwards, trailing a gray dust cloud along the gumbo road, they rolled into a settlement by the track. A sluggish creek, bordered by poplars and willows, looped about the plain and went under the line near the locomotive water tank. Opposite the agent's office two tall, new iron elevators sparkled in the sun; a wooden hotel, a combined livery yard and garage, one or two stores and a row of small shiplap houses fronted the line. The rather dreary settlement was very much of the type that springs in a few months along the new Western tracks.

The station-agent declared no strangers had recently visited the depot; certainly none had stolen on board the trains, which stopped in daylight. The telegraph-operator was somewhere around, and if Hugh would wait, he would send the young fellow along.

"I expect he is at the poolroom," Hugh remarked to Harden. "Until I call up the police superintendent I don't know our plans, but in the meantime you might take the

bicycle to the garage and get their expert to see if all is straight."

"So long as a bike will carry you, to leave her alone is a useful rule, and imagine the expert's proper job is to mend Clover-leaf wagons," Harden rejoined. "However, since she is rather noisy, I'll consult with him; and then I'll try to get a hot bath at the hotel."

"Your nerve is pretty good," Hugh remarked with a smile. "If the waitress is young and you use your charm, you might get some hot water in a coal-oil can. If you order a bath, the landlord will probably fire you down the steps."

Harden went off. Hugh waited for the telegrapher, and when he had sent his message sat down in the shade and rested his back against the office wall.

All was very quiet. Sometimes the wind hummed in the telegraph wires and sometimes a hammer clinked at the livery yard. On the hotel veranda two brown-skinned loungers occupied tilted chairs and rested their boots on the rails. In the distance, a rig crossing a low rise cut the sky. Shadows trailed across the plain and melted. Only the bright steel track indicated that man's industry sometimes disturbed the brooding calm.

Hugh began to study his railroad folder map. He must wait for a telegram and he was entitled to rest. After supper the road-service man would send for the abandoned car. By and by Hugh put up the map and drowsily looked about. A man at the livery harnessed a team and he noted the creek went past the back of the yard; thin birches, and willows fringed the steep bank. So far, he did not see a plan. Balham and Mullins had not got on board a train, but he did not know when they had left the car. Harden believed they would steer for Winnipeg, but to use the railroad would be risky, and since the garages were warned, they could not hope to get gasoline—Hugh's

back slipped down the wall and in a few moments he was asleep.

Something disturbed him and he looked up. The sun had moved across the sky and the elevators' shadows got long. Hugh was cramped and rather dizzy, but he saw the telegraph operator held out a message, and he tore the envelope. The young fellow went back to his office and Hugh stretched his legs on the dusty boards and knitted his brows. By and by Harden crossed the track.

"We have tuned up the wheel and I got a bath," he said. "Do you know you have slept for two hours? But you have got your telegram!"

"The superintendent states two mounted constables started for my farm soon after Drummond's message arrived. Since the boys are experts, they will probably follow the trail we hit, but they might not, and anyhow we are two or three days in front. Another couple ought to be at Green Springs, which, according to the folder map, is about forty miles from this spot, and the superintendent is trying to get orders through. In the meantime, the Souris railroad and the Montana trails are watched."

Harden studied the message.

"The superintendent seems to reckon on Balham's steering for the frontier by the shortest line. Well, he has not our grounds for believing the other hopes to get some money at Winnipeg. A policeman would not expect a fugitive to head *back* for the thickly-populated belt. Anyhow, if the troopers are on patrol, they might not be at Green Springs, and to look for them would occupy some time. I think we'll shove off again into the wilds."

"We will start after supper. Somehow I begin to feel I ought to have watched the car."

A bell soon rang and they crossed the track. After supper Harden went for the bicycle and they took the gumbo

road, and following it for some time, jolted across the grass. At the top of a low rise, Harden looked about.

"There's the bluff we passed. Farther south, you will see the little pond. Looks as if I'd kept our former line."

"Yes, your steering is pretty good."

"Then, where is the car?"

Hugh leaned sideways as far as he dared in order to command a wider view.

"By George, she is gone!"

Harden moved a control and for a minute Hugh concentrated on holding on. When they stopped he jumped down, but all he saw was some crushed grass where the car had turned. His glance searched the spacious landscape. Only the bluff and the shining pond broke the sweep of quiet plain.

"Where did they get the gasoline?" Harden asked.

"At the settlement. If they kept the creek's wooded bank, nobody would see them and the trees are very near the back of the road-service yard. One stole across behind the stable and got away with two cans."

"Looks plausible," said Harden. "Where are they now?"

"That's another thing. They might have carried off the juice before we made the settlement, but it's possible they saw us go by and lay down in the grass. We were away nearly four hours; the car might stand for ten miles an hour."

"In short grass I'd drive faster," Harden replied. "Anyhow they're forty miles in front. Let's get on board. For as long as possible we'll follow the tire marks."

The marks presently vanished on hard ground, the sky went red and the light began to go. Harden slowed the engine, and with the sunset on his right hand steered vaguely south, until he saw against the faint reflections the outline of a windmill pump. Five minutes afterwards

they got down at a lonely farm. The farmer had not seen a car; for a week he had not seen a rig. He stated he did not know how they had made his place on a wheel, but since they could get no farther, they must stop for the night. Hugh thanked him and agreed.

XXIX

THE PRAIRIE PATROL

AT nine o'clock in the morning Harden stopped the bicycle in the shade of a bluff. Dark clouds rolled up from the northwest, but the sun was hot and the spot commanded a wide sweep of plain. They had started three hours since from the farm where they stopped for the night, and laboriously pushed the bicycle across a sand belt. Where the faint trail went through treacherous gravel, she had once or twice capsized and, perhaps in consequence, the engine ran noisily. For a time Harden experimented, and then rubbed his greasy hands and sat down in the grass.

"The symptoms are rather disturbing, but I cannot locate the trouble, and I'd sooner not pull out the works," he said. "You were impatient to shove off and my breakfast was sketchy. I cannot yet, like a good frontiersman, consume in about five minutes all the food I'd like."

"As a rule, a frontiersman is satisfied with all the food he needs," Hugh rejoined.

Refusing a lump of doughy bannock from the parcel their host had put up, he resigned himself to wait. There was no use in his pushing Harden; sometimes Frank was stubborn, both had borne some strain, and to dispute about a few minutes' rest might be rash. The bannock was thick, and when hot had been split up the middle and smeared with drips. Crumbs and syrup stuck to Harden's mouth, and when he tied up the parcel he frankly sucked his fingers.

"You may think me fastidious, but I hate sticky con-

trols, and the Sachem must be handled gently," he said. "Well, let's resume our adventurous career. We don't know where we are going and we don't know when we will stop. Reminds one of 'The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head'."

Hugh got up, the engine rattled, and the bicycle lurched across the plain like a boat in broken water. In two hours he reckoned they made about twelve miles and he took three or four nasty knocks, but at length they joined a trail of a sort, and at noon a curving belt of trees ahead marked a creek. Since the sun was fiercely hot, he hoped the trail went to a bridge and the engine would pull them up the bank on the other side.

When they plunged into the shade, the ravine looked rather like a railway cutting, and by contrast with the bright plain, the hollow was cool and dark. Puzzling lights pierced the branches, Hugh saw indistinct thin trunks, and at the bottom trembling reflections on quiet water. The trail was torn by wheels and pitted by horses' feet.

"There is a bridge. I suppose you can steer her down?" he said.

"I hope I can steer her up," Harden replied. "However, if I let her go, and the gears engage——"

A savage jolt stopped him, thin trunks leaped up from the gloom, and Hugh was rudely flung about. He wondered whether Frank could take the turn at the bridge, and if the turf were beaten off the small logs. Piercing lights and trembling shadows flickered by, he swung himself sideways, and the bicycle banked. They were on the bridge, and across. Harden had, at all events, steered her down, and for a short distance their speed carried them up the incline on the other side.

Then Hugh felt the engine labor, and now they went slowly, the jolting no longer dazzled his eyes. The trail, as usual, cut the slope obliquely, and on one hand he

looked down on the tops of small trees. In a few moments he might be forced to jump off and shove, but the engine yet pulled, and he began to think she might pull them to the top.

"Stop her!" somebody shouted in a commanding voice. "Come off and put up your hands."

Harden did not stop. For a moment, he turned his head. Hugh did not hear an explosion, but something on the bicycle struck a thin, high note, and a little gray smoke floated about a bush. The front wheel slewed, Hugh and the other wheel went up, and, thrown forward by the lurch, he collided with Harden's back. Since the bicycle was plunging down the bank, he jumped, and rolled for three or four yards. A poplar stopped him, but the shock was hard and before he slackly got up two or three minutes went.

He saw the bicycle, a short distance below him, wedged in a wild currant bush; torn leaves and broken brush marked its track downhill. Harden was not about, and Hugh laboriously climbed to the trail, but his head swam and when he reached the bank top he sat down. As soon as he was a little steadier, he must look for Frank.

All was quiet. The fellow who had shot at them was gone. Hugh did not think Frank was hit, for the ringing note indicated that the bullet had struck the bicycle. When Frank heard the shout, he had turned his head and the front wheel had skidded on a gumbo ridge. Hugh did not think his not hearing the explosion strange. He had concentrated on trying to spot the shouter, and as a rule when he shot at a flying mark he did not hear the gun.

Sticks cracked and Harden pushed downhill through the tangled brush. He saw Hugh and signaled, but did not stop until he reached the bicycle, which he examined for a minute or two, and then climbed the bank.

"If we pull her up in half an hour, we'll be lucky, and anyhow they're gone," he said.

"Who are gone?" Hugh inquired.

"Balham and Mullins. You are a useful pal, but I have wondered why Constance chose you for my chief counselor."

"It is not at all important. Did you see the fellows?"

"I thought somebody stole through the wood, and in a soft spot I found two rows of footprints. Then I heard a car start."

"Mullins carries a pistol. It looks as if he's a good shot," Hugh remarked.

"Oh, well," said Harden, "he helped drive me to the private asylum, and I have felt his whip. I thought you might be hit, and I pictured little Anne——"

"Stout fellow! But did you see the car?"

"The ground rolls and the noise was behind the trees. It soon got faint and I expect they kept the other side of a rise."

"We ought to find the wheel-marks. What about the bicycle?"

"The tank is pierced at the fore-end. A rather large clean hole and the bullet must have gone near my leg. Yet I doubt if the brute meant to shoot me."

Hugh nodded. "He had four cartridges left and he shoots straight. If he had wanted, he might have put us out. I expect he was satisfied to put us out of action. If you had stopped, he'd have held us up while Balham smashed the bicycle. But why did they stop and wait for us *now*?"

"To run is safer than to fight, but when you can no longer run—suppose, for example, the gasoline was nearly exhausted? The fellow who stole the stuff at the road-service yard might get two cans. He could not carry more."

"I believe you have got it!" Hugh agreed. "Since the bicycle tank is punctured, I expect our gas is gone, but if a spot or two is left and we can drag her to the top, we must try to pick up their trail."

When they reached the bicycle a rank smell of petrol floated about, and Hugh cut and forced two willow plugs into the bullet holes. Then he twisted two or three broken spokes behind the others, and for half an hour they labored to drag the heavy machine up the hill. The engine fired, and although the spasmodic explosions and a crackling noise indicated that all was not well, they followed the trail to the top of a rise. The baked gumbo carried no tire marks, and until Hugh's eyes were dazzled his glance searched the plain. All he saw was the shining grass, rippling in the wind.

"The car is probably in one of the three or four hollows I can spot, but we don't know which, and if she is yet going, she is going faster than we are," he said. "If she has stopped, the fellows are lying up and would see us in useful time to crawl away. I think we'll follow the trail to the settlement and hire a rig."

Harden agreed, and for about ten minutes the bicycle noisily jolted ahead. Then the engine stopped and he got down.

"No more juice! We might make a settlement in the evening, but we might not, and in the circumstances I am going to take my lunch."

The farmer had put up some cold bacon and bannock, but they could not find water and the sun was scorching. Harden soon had enough and with a resigned shrug got on his feet.

"Adventure calls. The long, long trail's in front."

The gumbo crumpled in the sun and the little lumps and ridges sparkled like silver in the dust; the trail curved back across the waste as if it went on forever. Sometimes

a puff of fiery wind carried up the dust in a revolving pillar; when the wind dropped queer reflections touched the plain. A low rise looked like an island; one saw a shining flood spread between it and the flats from which it sprang. Over some spots the quivering air was luminous, as if it shot up from a furnace mouth. Harden felt the Northwest was dynamic; one sensed a sort of urgent throb. Somehow one was pushed along.

In the meantime Hugh pushed him along. His brown skin was getting grimy where the gray dust stuck; he carried himself easily, as if he had found his proper stride. Three miles and a half an hour! Frank, for a time might go faster, but he imagined Hugh could keep it up all day and for the most part of the night. In the circumstances, Frank was glad frontiersmen did not use the sort of boots British farmers approve.

Little gophers sped across the trail; a prairie chicken and her brood sprang from their dust bath and scattered explosively like fragments of a bomb. Then only a thin cloud's shadow touched the plain, and when the grass began to roll in slow waves it gently stole away. For the most part, the Western lilies were gone, but on the north slopes a few yet tossed their crimson heads.

Harden refused to look in front. The trail went over a gentle rise two or three miles off, and when he got there, he knew he would see it cross the next. Sometimes when he turned his head he saw a sparkling pond and tall grass where a sloo had dried. Had he been near a settlement, somebody would have cut the stuff for hay.

Hugh was yet going easily and Harden now admitted he could not beat his speed. The sun went down the sky, and behind the bluffs they passed the shadows got long. One could keep a beaten trail in the dark, and Hugh rather obviously meant to reach the settlement. At seven o'clock he agreed to stop for supper by a very small creek that

ran in a shallow channel. As a rule, creeks of the sort are cold and sweet, and Harden bathed his scorched face and galled feet in the sparkling water. Soon after he began his frugal meal he heard a rhythmic drumming.

"Somebody's riding pretty hard!" he said. "Now the noise is louder, I think there are two men."

"R.N.W.P. They hunt in couples," Hugh agreed. "You need not signal. I expect they know where we are."

"I am not going to signal. For twenty minutes I do not move unless I'm forced," Harden rejoined. "Still, I suppose one ought to be hospitable, and if the troopers can eat the nester's bannock, to go without will not cost me much."

Two young brown-skinned, athletic fellows stopped their horses by the creek. But for their wide Stetson hats, their uniform was a soldier's uniform, and Harden thought one carried the British officer's stamp, although he had not the stars.

"Where are you from?" he asked, commandingly.

Harden smiled. Sometimes he did smile when he was annoyed.

"Our last stop was a homestead some distance back. I cannot tell you exactly where it is."

"Then, you perhaps know where you are going?"

"I'm sorry we don't," said Harden. "My pal's an optimist, and if we keep on going, he imagines we will hit a settlement. You might, however, state what it has to do with you?"

Hugh said nothing. Frank, so to speak, took the floor, and he was competent. On the whole, the Royal North-West were a first-class lot, and he admitted their claim to be the settler's friends, but sometimes one here and there too evidently used the firm hand. Hugh did not like a boss of any sort, and he thought a small boss the worst.

"As a rule, we ask the questions, but I'll put you wise,"

the young corporal replied. "We are looking for two hobos who not long since shot up a farmer's wife."

"Oh, well," said Harden, "my pal is rather like a hobo, and I doubt if they'd let me into a fashionable restaurant; but you have not inquired who we really are."

"We reckon we know," rejoined the corporal. "Where did you leave the drummer's automobile?"

Harden languidly studied him. The young fellow was not Canadian; although perhaps only a Scot would recognize the clear ring of certain consonants. The note was patrician, and one heard it nowhere but in Scotland's capital. Then he remarked the other's fine physical cultivation and rather insolent grace. One saw why, for all his youth, he was corporal in the Royal North-West; but Harden rather pictured him a subaltern of The Grays.

"I wonder whether you know Loretto, which is not in Italy?" he said in a thoughtful voice.

The other gave him a swift, surprised glance, and hesitated. Somehow Harden thought he compared their respective ages.

"Do you imply that you were there?"

"I mustn't boast," said Harden. "When it looked as if I might be sacked, I quit. The head Sachems are fastidious, and when people begin to think you'll have to go, the proper line's to start."

A touch of stronger color came to the corporal's sunburned skin, and he perhaps moved his leg, for his horse tossed its head and steel links jingled. The Canadian constable knitted his brows, as if he were puzzled.

"This fellow's an Englishman, all right, but I wouldn't allow he or the other was a dope fan."

"One mustn't be rash," Harden remarked. "My pal's a Cumbrian and in Cumberland their motto is, *Thoo niver knows*. Besides, if you told your corporal he was English, he might get mad."

"You will quit fooling," rejoined the corporal. "To haul you to the settlement would occupy some time, but unless you satisfy us, you will trot there by my horse."

Harden turned to Hugh.

"In the circumstances, you might hand him his superintendent's message."

For a moment or two the corporal studied the telegram. Then he got off his horse.

"My apologies, Mr. Nicol. Had your friend informed us at the beginning, they would not have been needed. I suppose you are looking for the fellow who shot your wife?"

"We have followed his trail for some distance," said Hugh. "If you will take a smoke, we will tell you all we know."

He pulled out some cigarettes, the corporal sat down, and the constable, holding the horses, stood behind the group. Hugh narrated his search for Balham, the theft of his team, and his following the stolen car. When he stopped, the corporal pondered.

"Yes," he said, "I expect they resolved to hold you up because they were short of juice and their plan is to steal some more. Well, the trail forks and the west fork goes to a settlement where one or two cars are kept. We will push on and warn their owners to watch out. On the whole, I reckon the fellows are in front, and in a few minutes we must start. At the settlement a graded road goes southwest. Our orders are to watch the road, which is the shortest line to Montana."

"We believe the fellows will steer for Winnipeg and Pembina."

"But why do you think they'd go *back* southeast, across the populated belt where the farm telephones are?"

Hugh glanced at Harden, who gave him no sign. To choose if they would enlighten the police about Balham's

object for seeking Mark Gardiner was Frank's business. Hugh saw the drawback, but he felt the police ought to know.

"They told Mrs. Drummond they were going there," Harden replied.

The corporal shrugged scornfully. "Oh, well, so long as you are satisfied—— But we must get busy. If you meet some more of the boys tell them promptly who you are. To joke might be dangerous. I expect you know they are authorized to shoot?"

He signed the constable and got on his horse. Harden watched them go and his look was thoughtful.

"There is no use in talking to an obstinate fool," he said. "Anyhow, I dared not let him know I thought Mullins was after Mark."

"All the same, if Mullins is caught, he might state why he hoped you and Gardiner would be generous?" Hugh remarked. "The tale would not, of course, help him escape his punishment; but if he's revengeful, he might reckon on its hurting you."

"Quite," said Harden grimly. "Something must be risked, and so long as the fellow is punished, I can bear the consequences."

XXX

THE CONSTRUCTION GANG

IT began to look as if Balham and Mullins had vanished. At the settlement Hugh and Harden reached some hours after their meeting the police, they engaged a small car, and followed an elusive clue that carried them to Manitoba. In Manitoba the settlements were more numerous, and agricultural machinery agents, patent medicine peddlers, and other itinerant salesmen visited the farms. There was the trouble, because Harden followed two respectable door-spring merchants for forty miles.

The roads were bad, and when a thunderstorm softened the gumbo to keep the greasy track was hard. Wheels skidded in the mud, and sometimes on an incline refused to pull the laboring car out of the holes. At one spot, Harden, for the larger part of the morning, pushed green willows under the spinning tires. To some extent his advance was circuitous, but he was persuaded Balham would make for Winnipeg, and as far as possible, he now steered southeast.

After a scorching day, they stopped in the evening by a railroad. For two or three hours they had followed a broken trail, and now the light was going they did not know where they were. Hugh was resigned to sleep on board and studied his map. Harden lighted a cigarette.

"My notion is, the trail goes nowhere," he said. "Our luck has not been good, but to follow the door-spring merchants was your happy plan."

"They were going south," Hugh remarked in an apologetic voice.

"We started *north*, and if we ever reach Winnipeg, we'll have perambulated the greater part of two provinces. We and Balham have marked our track. Your team and broken wagon, the drummer's car, and the smith's bicycle! When the chase is over, to collect the wreckage will be something of a job. Anyway, I'm persuaded the swine are heading for Winnipeg, but unless they get there soon, Mark will be gone."

"They know he is going; Mrs. Drummond showed them the newspaper paragraph. We may yet beat them. When we last talked about it, you declared you had weighed the consequences."

Harden smiled. "That is so, Hugh. Balham is cunning, and he would not allow Mullins to acknowledge himself a blackmailer. He'd discreetly indicate that the prudent line was for me to persuade you to help him out. Well, if I could persuade you, I would not."

"Mullins shot little Anne," said Hugh.

"Before you were her lover, Anne was my pal. It accounts for much, but not perhaps for all. One does not publicly examine one's emotions. In a way, it's not decent, and as a rule nobody's much interested; but I expect my resolve to punish the swine has rather puzzled you. After my running away from them in the Old Country, you felt I was not—*consistent* is the old-fashioned word?"

There was no use in pretending and Hugh nodded.

"Very well," said Harden, "you are entitled to my confidence, and here is my apology. When I got back from the German prison my health and nerve were broken. I had been for some months in hospital and food was short. In my first week's freedom, I got a knock that hurt worse than the machine-gun bullet. I was frankly and horribly afraid of Balham; I felt I must think for Constance and ought perhaps to let her go. A shell-shocked neurotic's habit is to exaggerate. The swine got some money, but he

did not know I had much and the sums were not large. His plan was to use me for a tout, who would find him customers for his dope. When I'd begun to take the stuff, he imagined I durst not refuse."

"But you did refuse. You tried to knock the fellow out."

"I was knocked out. Balham was physical-drill instructor and did not himself use dope. I went for him because I knew if I hesitated I'd agree. If he had used some tact, he'd have got me and I'd have gone down for good. Because I was abjectly afraid and humiliated, I resolved to fight."

Hugh said nothing, but he admitted a man who fought because he was afraid had some useful qualities.

"The rest-cure plan was really mine, but when I got into the home my relations thought I ought to stop there, and after all they had some grounds," Harden resumed. "The important thing is, the cure worked, Constance stuck to me nobly, and you took me to Canada. Looks as if the best tonic for body and brain was a useful job. Well, I am going to stop in Canada, and Constance approves. In the Northwest nobody bothers about what you suppositiously did, or did not do, in the Old Country. You start fresh, and level with the rest; your only handicap is your temperament. However, I mustn't philosophize."

"You mean you are no longer afraid of Balham and Mullins' tale?"

"Now you understand," Harden agreed. "The brute shot Anne, and the fellow who tries to get rich by exploiting young fools' vices is the foulest brute that lives. Besides, since I'm frankly human, I'd like him to pay for exploiting mine. Now they are after Mark. He is a pushful Gardiner and wherever we met we'd clash, but if I must choose between him and Mullins, I'm for Cousin Mark—— Well, that's done with, and we will not talk

about it again. To wreck the car would not help much, and I suppose we are here for the night."

Hugh agreed. They had food and blankets, and he began to pull up the hood. The hinged joints were stiff, and when he noisily jerked the frames Harden signed him to be quiet. Dusk was falling and the plain got indistinct, but the rhythmic beat of horses' feet pierced the evening calm.

A few minutes afterwards two horsemen stopped by the car. Although the light was nearly gone, Hugh remarked their hats and knew their uniform.

"Engine trouble, strangers?" one inquired.

Harden said the trail was rough and they thought to wait for daybreak. Hugh noted a touch of calm authority in the other's voice. The fellow was a sergeant, and he was not young.

"Well, we don't want to bother you, but you might switch on your headlamps and walk a few yards in front."

Hugh signed Harden to obey and when the bright beam leaped up they stood where the illumination touched their faces.

"You are all right," said the sergeant. "However, you might tell us who you are."

Hugh did so. The other laughed and got off his horse.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Nicol! We hit your trail before."

"Then, you met the Green Springs patrol?"

"That's so," said the other and smiled indulgently. "The corporal's quite a bright lad and hopes to get promoted. He reckons you were obstinate."

"It looked like that. We are yet convinced our proper line is southeast to the main railroad tracks."

The sergeant sat down on the running-board and lighted a cigarette Harden gave him.

"Suppose you find the men you are after. What are you going to do about it?"

Hugh smiled. "Something would depend on the circumstances. I might, for example, stick to them wherever they went while my partner telegraphed for the police."

"Do you carry a gun?"

"I do not; I have not a permit. If the other lot forced me, I'd be willing to use my hands."

"I have no gun," Harden remarked. "If I get a fighting chance, I hope to use my boots."

"So long as you are satisfied to follow your men and send for us, we'll leave you to it, but you'll stop right there," said the sergeant meaningly. "Well, I'm as far south as I mean to go, and I'll tell you something; Mullins is not going to Winnipeg. Before he robbed Mrs. Nicol, we got word from Ontario to watch out for him. Looks as if he and two or three more had gone into the dope business, but when all was fixed to round up the gang, he and his partner quit. The Ontario police lost his trail at Fort William. We found he'd got as far West as Portage-la-Prairie, where he vanished again."

Hugh began to see a light, and moving his foot quietly, he touched Harden's leg. Portage is not far from Winnipeg, and Balham had found out, perhaps from a newspaper, that Gardiner had started for the Northwest. Thinking the back blocks safer than the populated belt, he had followed Mark, and when he stopped at Hugh's homestead his money was almost gone. He, no doubt, suspected the police searched for him, and since he needed money for his flight to the boundary, he allowed Mullins to seize the notes. Yet all they had carried off was a few dollars, and in consequence, he must try to get some from Gardiner.

"The men were soldiers in Mr. Gardiner's battalion," he said. "We believe they will look him up at Winnipeg."

Unless they could get some money, they dare not cross the frontier."

"I reckon Mr. Gardiner reads the newspapers," the sergeant rejoined. "If he spotted the men for the two we are inquiring for, he'd call up the city police."

Hugh shrugged. He dared not be frank and the sergeant resumed: "Anyhow, our bosses have fixed the line for me to patrol, and we must get going. Our next stop's ten miles in front, and I doubt if you could get there in the car."

He and the constable got on their horses and soon melted in the dark.

"One cannot convince a policeman," Harden remarked. "However, if Balham thinks he can bully Mark, he does not know my cousin."

"Yes," said Hugh, rather dryly, "since he's not at all a fool, his hopefulness is queer."

"You are as obstinate as the police," Harden rejoined. "As I have stated, a number of times, Mark is not an attractive fellow, but he is certainly not the sort to run away."

For a minute or two he occupied himself with the car hood; and then looked up.

"Hello! Do you think somebody's homestead is burning?"

Hugh jumped on the running-board. Some distance off, a colorless, trembling reflection leaped up from the dusky plain. The light itself was below the dip of the ground, but he pictured it dazzling and intensely white.

"I expect it's a contractor's blast lamp," he said. "A construction gang is probably cutting out a curve in the track. Help me pull this strap."

They unrolled their blankets and tried to fix the hood. The night was not cold, but they must, if possible, keep out the mosquitoes and a folding frame had jambed. By

and by Hugh sat down. There was no use in his breaking something, and when he was cooler he would try again.

A bright fan-shaped beam advanced across the plain and he heard a measured throb he had not remarked while he was occupied. For a minute or two the beam got faint, as if the train were behind a rise; and then shot up in a vivid silver blaze.

"They use splendid head-lamps," Harden remarked. "When you looked up the folder, you said there was no train for about twelve hours."

"I expect this train is a freight. The fireman has got busy and he is burning very soft coal."

North American soft coal is notorious for its smoke, and behind the advancing light a tossing black cloud trailed across the sky. Yellow flashes and red sparks shot up explosively.

"The evening is not remarkably peaceful," Harden grumbled. "I suppose we have got to move. If we stop, we'll be suffocated and some red cinders might go through the hood."

Turning on his lights, he backed the car for a short distance. When he stopped he fronted the track and a whistle pierced the roll of wheels. For a few moments he turned his head from the head-lamps' dazzling beam; and then the snorting locomotive forged majestically past. Glowing cinders streamed back in the smoke, and under the sooty cloud a long row of flat cars jolted across the field of Harden's lights. Groups of workmen occupied the ballast cars, some lying among their shovels and turkey bags, some sitting with their legs across the ledge. Huddled figures and blurred faces leaped into the light and melted, but here and there one squarely fronting Harden was for a moment distinct. When four or five cars had passed, he seized Hugh's arm.

"D'you see the third man in the row?"

Hugh turned his head, but the car was gone and the rest were empty. The train rolled by, and when the calaboos vanished and the noise began to die away Hugh asked:

"Whom do you think you saw?"

"Mullins! My eyes were rather dazzled. All I got was a sort of flash-light picture, but I don't think I was cheated."

"By George, it's possible!" said Hugh. "If he and Balham joined a construction gang, nobody would inquire about them until the pay clerk came along. There's no use in our trying to follow them, and they are probably bound for a gravel pit or a rail dump some distance down the line. We might reach the camp where the blast lamp is and find out something from the foreman."

Harden threw back the hood and started the engine.

"A Hollywood stunt, but sit tight, and we'll perhaps get there."

For some time Hugh doubted. The trail crossed the railroad, but they must follow the line, and the tossing lights perhaps exaggerated the obstacles. Where he thought the grass two feet high, the wheels ran smoothly, and where he thought the short stuff level, the bonnet went up and the lights raked the sky. A little willow bush looked like a thicket, but he did not see the holes into which they plunged, and when he thought to hear a gumbo block crush beneath the tires the shock indicated that they had struck a nigger-head stone.

They got entangled in a dry sloo. The crackling grass stalks topped the wheels and their advance was marked by a turmoil like a steamship's wake. Turning the end of a bluff, they ploughed through stiff brush, and pulled up three or four yards from a sloo that was not dry. By and by they plunged into loose sand in which the churning wheels could get no hold, and Harden stopped the engine.

"If I knew where to steer for firm ground, we might pull her out. Since I do not, I think we'll walk," he said.

An hour after they left the railroad crossing, they reached the construction camp. A big lamp on a tripod threw up a pillar of intense white flame, and the strong illumination sparkled on the rails and touched bent figures trimming ballast between the ties. Shovels flashed and the rattle of the stones was like the noise of surf on a gravel beach. A tall fellow superintended, and Hugh stated the object for his visit.

"I have got three or four toughs in this bunch," the foreman replied. "If you like, I'll line up the boys."

"We mustn't stop the job," said Hugh. "My partner will walk along the row, but he thinks the man went out on the ballast train. Did you engage two strangers?"

"They're hired at a labor agency," the foreman replied. "When the ballast cars come up from the other camp, I keep the boys I think I'll want. The company's shifting the gangs about, and a stranger wouldn't be noticed unless he asked for a pay check. But what are the two you are trailing like?"

Hugh told him and he cogitated.

"Yes, a short, square-built fellow with queer eyes was here for two days and went out on the train you met. We are nearly through, and the boss at the main camp is sending a bunch down to Brandon. The company has another job at Portage, and the station agent will pick out as many as they want, and ship the rest through to Winnipeg. I guess the police wouldn't think about searching a construction train."

Harden joined them, and when he stated that Balham was not in the gang, Hugh wrote a telegram on a page from his pocket book and gave the foreman some money.

"I expect you can flag to-morrow's train and give the message to the conductor?"

The other engaged to do so and offered them blankets and breakfast if they would stop at his tent. Hugh refused, and when they started for the car he said to Harden:

"I have telegraphed the police superintendent, but I think our plan is to start for Winnipeg as soon as we can see the trail. I believe the roads are good after you reach the Assiniboine."

XXXI

THE LAST RUN

HUGH had but a railroad folder map, and for the most part the trails did not go where he wanted to go, but on the whole, he kept his line to the main Canadian Pacific track. Sometimes he boldly left the trail and plunged into the wilds; sometimes he followed a third-class dirt road. Now and then he saw scattered wooden homesteads and long sweeps of wheat.

At length, when Harden had begun to think them altogether lost, they joined a graded road. Its surface was crumbling gumbo, torn by wheels and horses' feet, but they saw the marks of tires and by and by the track got smoother. Harden's head ached, his eyes were dazzled, and his hands were cramped. The engine knocked, and he began to think the little car, like himself, had had enough.

"Will she keep going until we make the railroad?" Hugh inquired when they climbed an incline by a lonely butte.

"She must," said Harden, and added with a laugh: "There's no use in your pretending you know where the railroad is, and I frankly admit I do not, although since it goes right across the map to Calgary, I suppose we'll hit it some time, if I can hold the wheel. However, I see a sort of washout we cannot get round. She's a pretty good steeplechaser. Hold on and watch her jump!"

With a crash and jar they took the gully a storm had torn in the gumbo soil; and on the high ground where trees climbed a little hill, Hugh indicated a long brown smear on the dazzling horizon.

"A freight train! When she hauls a big load, you can see a Canadian locomotive's smoke for at least ten miles."

Half an hour afterwards, the tops of two or three elevators pushed up from the grass, and by and by Harden saw a low square object he thought might be a wooden church tower.

"A settlement of some size!" he said. "Do you know the place?"

"Portage-la-Prairie," Hugh replied. "About forty miles from Winnipeg, and I expect we will hit a motor road by the Assiniboine. The time is three o'clock."

"We started at five o'clock," said Harden. "Ten hours on the road, and on the grass. Well, I suppose I must buck up and stand for some more."

Hugh himself was cramped and shaken. From an automobilist's point of view, the best road they had followed was bad, and their progress across country was something like a steeplechase. Yet, if it was possible for flesh and blood, when dusk fell they must be at Winnipeg, although so far as he could find out from the folder, there was no train. Well, Frank was letting the engine go. He knew where something must be risked.

Trailing a thick dust cloud, the car rocked and plunged along, and the elevator tops grew to castle towers. Then, clustered round their feet, one saw roofs, and presently thin telegraph poles sprang from the plain. A black cloud leaped up, as if a shell exploded, and floated about the elevators. The cloud rolled forward, and drew out in a long plume pointing east.

"A train for Winnipeg," said Hugh. "It's possible Balham and Mullins are on board."

"We will soon know," said Harden. "Don't talk!"

In five minutes the car rolled noisily along the street that runs back squarely from the Canadian Pacific line, and jumping down at a garage, they hurried to the station.

The agent was at his office, and when two dusty, brown-skinned strangers pushed in he looked up with surprise. A tear in Hugh's clothes was fastened by a nail; Harden's were freely stained by oil. Before the agent understood who they were and what they wanted nearly a minute went.

"The train you saw was a construction special from Brandon," he remarked. "She stopped for about an hour while the gang loaded up some old ties and a foreman picked the boys he wanted for a job along the line. The others are bound for Winnipeg, but I don't know when she'll arrive. She must stop to put down the gang, and we want the road for a fast freight and a West-bound local."

"Then, she might wait for an hour or two in the side tracks?" said Hugh. "I suppose you did not notice the men we are looking for?"

The agent said he did not. Since the fellows had joined the construction gang and traveled by the company's order, they would excite nobody's curiosity. The best plan he saw was for Hugh to wire the Winnipeg city police to watch out for the train. Hugh thanked him, but the message he sent was to the superintendent of the Royal North-West.

"You have no train for four or five hours," he said. "What about the other depot?"

"Nothing's doing," replied the agent. "Their next passenger goes out at midnight."

Hugh and Harden went off, and Hugh said:

"I telegraphed the superintendent because I felt I ought; but it is possible he is not at his guard-room and my message may not reach him for some time."

"In fact, you hope it will not?" Harden remarked. "You are not keen to leave Mullins' punishment altogether to the police."

"I am flesh and blood. Then for you to meet Balham and Mullins at Gardiner's office before the police arrive might be useful. I think it your best chance to find out all the fellows really know."

"Particularly if Mark was there? You stick to your suspicion! Well, if they tried to blackmail him, our arrival might be embarrassing, and since Mark was a famous orderly-room bully, I expect he'd use third-degree methods better than we could. Anyhow, the interview would be interesting, and I admit I have pondered something of the sort."

Hugh smiled. He had perhaps not altogether carried out his citizen's duty but he had, as he had engaged to do, telegraphed the Royal North-West Police, and he hoped he and Harden would arrive before the train. Construction specials must wait for the scheduled trains, the engineer must stop for water, and the track-mending foreman might hold him up for some time.

"I doubt if the car will carry us to Winnipeg and a motorcycle would be faster," he said. "Come on. Let's see what they have got at the road-service house."

They found a large red motorcycle of the make they had used before. The proprietor studied their clothes and asked for a guarantee.

"Fill her up," said Harden. "We reckon to stop at Winnipeg, but you never know. The car is your security. You will take down the engine and put all straight, and when you send your bill we will give you shipping orders."

A minute or two afterwards, the powerful engine roared, stores and frame houses rolled back, and Hugh felt the speeding machine jump the lines at the end of the street. He was frankly tired and the road for Poplar Point although better than the prairie trails, was not at all a racing track. For the most part, he was satisfied to hold on and shield his bent head from dust and wind behind

Harden's shoulders. Frank was tougher stuff than he had thought; since they started from the homestead he had borne an awkward strain but he was not yet beaten. Hugh imagined the chase would end at Winnipeg, but if it did not, he was going all the way.

Sometimes for a few moments he looked about. Wire fences sped past, wooden homesteads leaped up and vanished. At one spot he saw swarming turkey poults break from a field of wheat. A spoke twanged like a fiddle string, as if something struck the wheel, and he imagined the bicycle charged destructively through the fluttering broods. A man shouted, and jumped from the road; his voice hardly pierced the exhaust's shattering snort.

In the north, dark smoke stained the sky. Hugh noted a plume and a pillar. The plume moved; the pillar went straight up and got wider at the top like a waterspout. A side-tracked locomotive, that perhaps hauled the construction train, but there was no use in his telling Harden. Unless Frank fixed his eyes on the road, they might crash.

Long shadows splashed the dust and in the shade the wind was cool. Water sparkled behind the trunks; and then, across gray willow swale, Hugh saw the Assiniboine. A long, straggling village bordered the road; gardens and orchards separated the wooden houses, and trees larger than the poplars of Saskatchewan stretched their branches across the roofs. The village was almost like an English village, but before he knew it was gone. Then, not far off in the north, locomotive smoke trailed across the sky. Hugh touched Harden.

"You mustn't look round! A train I believe is the construction train is passing us."

Harden nodded. "I'm now risking something, but if you can hold on——"

The explosions quickened and for ten minutes the noise was like a machine gun, but the smoke cloud drew ahead.

The engineer had got a clear track and his road was better than the road by the Assiniboine. Then, at a curve, for all their inclined bodies, the motorcycle swung wide, and plunged into wheel-torn soil by a fence. It looked as if they were going through the fence, but Harden kept control and, jolting savagely, they rejoined the road. Afterwards he used some caution, but he yet drove fast, and Hugh doubted if his eyes could search the reeling, heaving road. Perhaps they did not. Sometimes Frank was satisfied to trust his luck.

The railroad got farther off and the smoke plume vanished. The trees by the river curved back and for a time were lost. The sun was getting low, and when they sped past a windmill pump the shadow stretched across a field. Hugh dared not pull out his watch, but when they reached Winnipeg he imagined Gardiner's office would be shut. He ought to carry his news to the office of the city police. He would do so, after he had inquired for Gardiner at his hotel.

Distant trees curved back to the road; he saw a wood, a railroad bridge across the deep river channel, and small houses on the plain. Not very long since an Indian village had occupied the bluff.

"Headingley, about ten miles from Winnipeg," he said.

They sped past a hotel on a corner block, and two or three stores. Little shiplap houses flitted by, and the straight, fenced road in front was good. Now and then they passed a grocery van steering for Winnipeg, and met a car or a motorcycle going the other way, but nobody passed them. By and by the ground began to roll and they sped down a curving incline where trees and houses bordered the road.

"Deer Park," said Hugh. "We'll soon be in Portage Avenue. Watch out for traffic."

Harden slowed his engine. A crowded street-car blocked

the road, and when he was round the obstacle he met three or four open cars carrying family groups for an evening excursion, and a row of motorcycles. Foot passengers occupied the sidewalk, and it looked as if the Winnipeg offices were shut. In order to avoid another street-car, Harden crossed in front of a speeding van. The bicycle skidded on the rails and Hugh imagined they would plunge into a group on the sidewalk. Frank pulled her round, a foot or two behind a standing car. He was yet driving faster than he ought, but Hugh let him go. A vague, half superstitious fear pushed him on. He felt that every moment Frank lost might cost somebody much.

In front, tall office blocks bordered the avenue and the smoke of the Ogilvie mills floated across the roofs. On the other side were the university and the jail. If their luck was good, Mullins would soon be behind the walls. Main Street was but a few blocks ahead, and one ought to find a city policeman at the corner.

Hugh touched Harden. The engine stopped, the front wheel jarred, and they were on the pavement. Hugh jumped for a large arched door and ran along the hall. All was quiet in the spacious building and his steps echoed hollowly. Glancing at the roll of names, he pushed the elevator bell and beat on the rails.

"Stopped for the night!" gasped Harden. "Mark's office is two floors up. Somebody might yet be about and we don't know his hotel. Come on up the steps!"

They climbed the steps as fast as they could go; Harden four or five yards in front. The strain they had borne perhaps accounted for something, but Hugh felt they must reach Gardiner's office soon. His breath was labored and his heart beat.

At the second floor two passages branched from the landing. Harden turned right and vanished, and on the

other side a door shut noisily. When they tried to recapture all that happened in the next few moments, Frank and Hugh agreed that they heard the first pistol shot after the door shut. Frank admitted he had not stopped to study the names on the board at the landing because the light was not good.

Steps echoed in the passage, Harden shouted, and a man plunged down the stairs. Hugh had seen Balham at Carlisle station, and he seized him, but the shock carried him off his feet and he went backwards down the steps. His head struck the stone, but for a few moments he kept his hold. Then he heard two dull explosions, a woman screamed, and letting Balham go, he leaped up the steps.

At the top he saw Harden in the left passage; Frank had gone the wrong way and turned back. In front of him, a man reeled from a door, swaying as if he were drunk, and crashed on the concrete flags. Hugh, shouting Frank to stop, jumped across the fellow and plunged into the office.

In a corner, a girl, her hands clasped across her eyes, sobbed and choked hysterically. Mark Gardiner occupied a chair behind a desk, but he had lurched forward, and his head rested on some scattered documents. A large, old-army model revolver was near his hand. Hugh remarked another, and a broken telephone standard, on the floor. Thin smoke floated near the ceiling, and the room smelt of acrid fumes. Hugh braced up strongly and touched Gardiner. He heard a board crack, and Harden, on the other side of the desk, pushed him back.

"You mustn't; he's dead!" said Harden, in a shaky voice. "I can see where the bullet went—Mullins is dead—I s'pose Mark shot him. If we had but got through five minutes sooner——"

"Brace up!" Hugh said dully. "Somebody's coming——"

Boots rattled on the concrete and a young fellow jumped into the room.

"A dead man is in the passage——" he gasped and stopped, his eyes fixed on Gardiner.

Hugh heard fresh footsteps and started for the door, but a man pushed him back.

"Nobody is going out. Who's been shooting? I'm the janitor."

"Then, you might see the people who are following you don't crowd the room," said Hugh, and turned to Harden.

"Can you not stop the girl?"

Harden touched the sobbing clerk.

"You are not hurt. Please be calm! We want you to tell us all you know."

The girl moved her hands from her eyes and glanced at Gardiner. Then her head went back slackly against the wall.

"Where can we get her a drink?" said Harden. "Brandy's the stuff. Oh, I forgot. Blast the Prohibitionists!"

"If you want a hard drink, you must find a doctor and pay him two dollars for a certificate," the young male clerk remarked. "I heard two or three shots and ran upstairs. Now I want to know——"

It looked as if the shooting had excited others' curiosity, for a noise in the passage indicated that fresh arrivals stopped by Mullins.

"Keep the door," said Hugh. "The telephone's gone West. I expect a patrolman is at the avenue corner. Anyhow, the city police office is but a few blocks up Main Street." He beckoned the clerk. "You are the man to go. But stop a moment, and my pal will give you a description of a fellow the police ought to find."

"Yes, Balham's gone," said Harden, and began to write on the back of a letter he took from the desk. He gave

the clerk the letter and, sending him off, turned to Hugh. "We must rouse the girl."

They got some water, and when they had supported her to another room, Hugh ordered the janitor to warn the people outside they must not touch the body. The man went off and Hugh said:

"Three shots! I wonder whose was first. It is important, Frank."

Harden nodded. His look was stern and his brows were knit.

"If we knew why Mark shot Mullins—— Unless the police stop Balham, I expect we never shall know, and they must not find out."

XXXII

BALHAM GOES WEST

IN about five minutes a police officer and a doctor arrived, and when they had examined Mullins and Gardiner, ordered the group to the other room. The Kelvenden Company occupied two rooms, and a door in each opened to the passage. In a few words, the janitor stated all he knew. When he was on the ground floor he heard three pistol explosions and somebody shout. Then there was a noise on the stairs and a man ran through the hall.

"The fellow who went off on a motorcycle!" remarked the doctor.

"I sent you his description," said Harden. "In the meantime, he's driving as fast as possible for the United States."

"A telephone can beat the fastest bicycle," the police officer rejoined. "As soon as your message arrived, our staff got to work, and if he makes the frontier he will be luckier than I think."

He began to question the girl. She had not altogether recovered from the shock she had got, but Hugh thought her observant and shrewd. When he first arrived, he noted that she had put on her coat and hat.

"In the afternoon Mr. Gardiner went to Boniface, where the company hold some lots," she said. "Mr. Gardiner thought he might be back at the office, but nobody need stop after the usual time. However, he was starting next day for Montreal and wanted some particulars tabulated for the London house, and when the others went I

waited to finish the job. Soon afterwards, two hoboes asked for Mr. Gardiner. They certainly looked like hoboes, but they were not these two."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Harden with a smile.

The girl colored and gave him an apologetic glance.

"These gentlemen had nothing to do with the shooting," she declared and resumed her narrative.

The men asked for Mr. Gardiner's hotel and went. At all events, she heard them on the stairs, but she now imagined they waited in a corridor. About half an hour since, Mr. Gardiner arrived and asked her for some documents. She brought the papers and while she took some notes the men came back. When Mr. Gardiner saw them his face went red. She thought him surprised and angry. He sometimes got mad.

"The inference is, he knew the fellows," remarked the police officer. "Did you study them?"

"The tall man seemed to hesitate. For all his shabby clothes, he was *gentlemanly*. The right word's hard to find."

"Near beer?" Harden suggested. "I think it meets the bill."

"What about the other?" the officer inquired.

"He certainly was a hobo, and he looked worked-up; *raised*, if you get me. His eyes were queer."

"In Manitoba, you cannot get drunk economically," Harden remarked. "Dope is indicated."

The doctor nodded. "I suspected a recent dose. We will take your story by and by."

The girl resumed her narrative. Mr. Gardiner impatiently waved her to go and she went to the other office. She was perhaps five minutes putting away some books and putting on her hat. In the meantime, she heard voices; the words could not be distinguished, but she knew the men got angry. One began to shout. She admitted her

curiosity was excited, and when she was in the passage she waited for perhaps a minute or two.

The tall man jumped out from the other door and a pistol exploded. She saw him before she heard the report. Two more shots went off, the short man reeled into the passage and fell down. She screamed and ran back to Mr. Gardiner's room. He was in his chair; he awkwardly pushed a wallet into his desk, and then tumbled forward. His head went down on the papers, and that was all.

She stopped with a shiver, as if she dared not think about it, and the officer went to the other room. When he returned he carried the wallet.

"Since Mr. Gardiner was going to Montreal, I suppose he got some money from the cashier. Do you know how much? The sum in the wallet is rather large."

The girl did not know, and the officer pondered.

"It rather looks like a dispute than robbery. The shooting was good."

"Mark Gardiner was a first-class pistol shot," Harden observed.

"Then you knew him?"

"He was my cousin. The other men were soldiers in his battalion and not very long since they tried to rob me. They carried off a few small bills, and shot my friend's wife, Mrs. Nicol. I expect the circumstances, so to speak, were similar; they asked for a small sum, and when they saw the wallet tried to snatch the lot. Then, and now, their luck was bad."

The officer gave him a dry smile.

"I began to think I located you, and when the fellows held up Mr. Nicol's homestead the Royal North-West were already on their track. However, I will take his statement."

Hugh narrated their search for Balham and Mullins, and the officer got up.

"I want the name of your hotel; in the morning I expect to send for you."

The doctor engaged to put the girl on board her street-car, and Hugh and Harden went with them down the stairs. At the hall door Hugh said:

"Our excursion has been expensive, and now I expect we must pay for the bicycle Balham stole. Anyhow, we need some clothes. If we went to the hotel as we are, I expect the clerk would refuse us a room."

Although the large stores were shut, and Harden's remarks about the fit and style annoyed the Jewish salesman at a back-street shop, they got some clothes, and dined at a small foreign restaurant near the Canadian Pacific depot. Soon after they reached the hotel Hugh was tranquilly asleep, but until midnight was long past Harden pondered. Only Anne afterwards knew all he thought about.

In the meantime, Balham's luck, at first, was good. Nobody in the avenue heard the pistol shots and only two or three people noted the workman who hurriedly got on a red motorcycle. Before one informed the police eight or nine minutes went.

Balham's object for taking the Portage road to the West was never known. He perhaps imagined the police would reckon on his going south for Pembina and the American boundary; perhaps he feared he might be stopped by the cross traffic at the Main Street corner. At all events, he kept the avenue, and the next news the police got was that a man on a red bicycle had come near to colliding with a street-car at Deer Park.

Headingley was warned by telephone, but a few moments before the road was blocked, a red motorcycle flashed along the street. A witness declared he heard a roar like an aeroplane and saw a man in shabby clothes, crouched low over the handles of the speeding machine.

The witness jumped for his life, and admitted that when he ran for the road-service house the tossing dust was half a mile off.

In a few moments Headingley was behind Balham, but when it perhaps looked as if the road to the West was open, his luck turned. It is possible he did not know the muddy Assiniboine runs in a deep gorge with wooded banks not far south of the road. Moreover, a strong wire fence guarded the ripening wheat fields, and at a curve a clump of poplars cut his view. When he swung furiously round the curve he saw two mounted constables behind the trees.

Balham's emotions might be pictured; they were never stated. He certainly knew the Royal North-West uniform and Stetson hat, and he perhaps thought the troopers searched for him. All are good rifle and revolver shots, and the fugitive who does not stop when they order runs a daunting risk. Balham did not stop, and constable Withers narrated his rash bid for freedom.

Fifty yards in front of the constable's horse, a trail, on the south side of the road, crossed a wheat-field and pierced a thin bluff. Although Withers thought the foot-board touched the soil when Balham banked at the corner, he got round, and the machine bucketed about like a fresh cayuse on the uneven trail. Only a man who dared not front the police would drive as the fellow drove, and Withers reached for his revolver, but did not shoot. A constable's business was, if possible, to capture his man alive. Moreover, he knew where the trail went, and the other rather obviously did not.

For all the risks Balham took, on uneven ground the horse went nearly as fast as the bicycle, and when they swept through the thin wood the constable was but sixty yards behind. The other could not go much farther, and Withers shouted him to stop for his life.

Balham went ahead, but the trail stopped, and man and bicycle vanished as if they had sunk into the ground. When the constable reached the spot, flames leaped up on the steep bank where somebody had cut the trees. A poplar stump supported a broken bicycle and it looked as if the burst tank had flooded the engine, for the stump and the wreckage burned furiously. Withers smelt melting rubber.

Five or six yards down the bank, a man lay across some bent willows, as if he had been violently flung into the bush. The troopers fastened their horses and went down. Withers lifted the man's head and opened his water bottle. Balham looked up dully.

"Mullins was doped; he cheated. We drowned the wrong man," he said.

"When they're all in, they talk as if they were dippy; but he could surely take a dare," the other constable remarked.

Withers ordered him to be quiet, but Balham said nothing more and in three or four minutes they knew he was dead.

In the morning after breakfast Hugh carried a newspaper to the hotel rotunda. A large cross-heading fixed his glance, and he gave Harden the newspaper.

"The Royal North-West are not often baffled."

"Balham is gone!" said Harden, and for a few moments looked straight in front. "My last chance to exonerate myself has vanished. The puzzle will never be solved."

"I wonder! You have, at all events, a useful clue."

"No," said Harden firmly. "I mustn't pretend to be generous, but the circumstantial evidence is vague, and to throw the blame on a man who's dead would not help much. People might think I durst not front him when he was alive. It's done with, Hugh; but in a way I was done

with when I got back from Germany, and in Canada one starts fresh."

For a time he brooded; and then Hugh said:

"I expect the police will soon send for us."

Harden looked up with a queer smile.

"Our line is obvious. When the police are in doubt, a good citizen's duty is to give them all the light he can. I mustn't claim that we have done so, and I am not going to. For me to be Mark's champion is something fresh, but the Gardiner's joined the clan, and the Scots are supposititiously a clannish lot. In short, we must as far as possible side-track awkward inquiries, and I hope our talents are equal to the job."

In a few minutes a bell boy crossed the floor and stated they were wanted at the telephone. Half an hour afterwards they were driven to Headingley, where they identified Balham, and then were carried back to the Winnipeg police office. In a quiet room two officers waited them, and one wore the Royal North-West uniform.

"You have seen the bodies," said the city officer. "Are you satisfied you know the men?"

"The man I saw at Headingley was certainly the man I tried to stop at the Kelvenden Company's office," Hugh replied.

"Both were the men I knew in the army and who stole Mr. Nicol's rig," said Harden. "When they visited his homestead we were not about, but I recognized them from Mrs. Nicol's and Mrs. Drummond's description."

"We have the ladies' statement," the Royal North-West officer remarked and gave Harden a thoughtful glance. "You imagined they looked you up because they had served in your battalion and reckoned you would see them out?"

Harden agreed. There was no use in his stating that Balham had thought to find Mark at the house.

"Were you not surprised that they risked shooting Mrs. Nicol?" asked the city officer. "In Canada, a murderer is hanged, and Mrs. Drummond was in the room."

"Mullins thought Mrs. Nicol meant to shoot. There's another thing; the fellow was a dope fiend, and when you have recently got a dose you don't bother about obstacles. Nothing daunts you, you feel like a conqueror. I know. In London Balham gave me the stuff. He and Mullins supplied a club the police were forced to shut, and in consequence I was for some time at a neurotics' home."

Hugh thought the others pondered and Frank had led them where he wanted them to go. Anyhow, he had rather cleverly indicated Mullins' grounds for imagining his victim might be again exploited.

"The strange thing is, the fellows should have reckoned on Mr. Gardiner's generosity," the city officer observed.

"Mark was their captain, they knew he was my cousin, and they did not know he knew Mrs. Nicol. They perhaps thought her dead, and in the circumstances must risk something in order to get money they needed for their escape across the frontier. They might have hoped to reach Winnipeg before the newspapers printed the story, and one or two escapades of mine at the rather notorious club were not the sort of exploits my relations liked people to talk about."

"It's plausible," agreed the Royal North-West officer. "The trouble is, your partner did not altogether put our superintendent wise."

Harden's glance was careless, but Hugh imagined Frank signaled that he had got his cue.

"I stated in my telegrams we were persuaded the men would try to make Winnipeg. If the police were resolved to watch the shortest roads to the frontier, I am not accountable. Besides, I am not an expert, and the Royal North-West know their job."

"Yet you kept your line! You perhaps hoped to run down the fellows before our constables arrived?"

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "the brutes had shot my wife."

The frontier officer knitted his brows. He vaguely suspected that the large young man had not yet told him all he might have told, but he did not know if it was important.

"You cannot carry on a private vendetta on the Canadian plains, and if you get up against another gang, you will be satisfied to call for the police," he said. "Well, Mr. Harden's argument is logical, and I will tell you something you perhaps did not know. It explains our imagining Mullins would not go to Winnipeg."

"Soon after he arrived in Canada, Mullins joined up with some dope smugglers. The Toronto police broke the gang and traced Mullins to Fort William. He was spotted and lost at Portage, and for some time our mounted constables searched the plains for him. It is possible he found out they were on his track, and we believe he had but little money; a man seized at Toronto carried the wad. Very well. When he stopped at your homestead he was desperate, and perhaps pushed on by dope."

"It's obvious," said Hugh. "He did not get much money, and his last chance was to load up at Winnipeg. He took the chance, and Balham took another at Headingley."

The city officer nodded and glanced at the frontiersman.

"A fresh dose of dope. Gardiner was obstinate, and Mullins pulled his gun. His partner was scared and pulled out. Gardiner's gun was in his desk. Yes, I think we have got all straight."

For a few moments the frontiersman said nothing, but he studied Harden. Then he shrugged.

"On the whole, I agree. Attempted robbery and mur-

der!" He turned to Hugh. "You will stop in town for the formal inquiry, which will be fixed as soon as possible."

The city officer let them go, and when they were across Main Street Harden smiled.

"It's done with and I'm happier. Sometimes a raw amateur baffles an expert."

"I doubt if the Royal North-West man was baffled," Hugh rejoined. "When he had found out all he felt was important, I rather think he was willing to stop."

Two days afterwards they started for Hugh's farm. They arrived at noon, and in the evening Hugh sat in the grass by his homestead door. Anne occupied a canvas chair. Her skin was white and her pose was slack, but when she talked her voice was firm, and the doctor had stated that she got better fast. Mrs. Drummond had engaged to stop for a week or two, and talked to Drummond, who harnessed his team. Straps rattled, the horses stamped, and chain links jingled musically.

Harden leaned against the doorpost. The sunset touched his brown skin with stronger color; his easy pose was virile. He fronted west and his fixed look was calmly confident. By and by he turned and gave Anne a smile.

"Yes," he said, "when I knew Balham was gone, I did get a knock, but, you see, I was to some extent resigned before. I was, of course, bothered about Constance. You perhaps remarked that when you first tried the simple life I studied your reactions?"

"I am not remarkably dull," said Anne. "To see I was not daunted was some relief? If I could be happy as a frontierswoman, you argued that Constance ought."

"Something like that. Constance stuck to me nobly. She's staunch as steel, and when you weigh the circumstances, her pluck——"

"Quite," said Anne. "I am not jealous and she is as fine as you think. At one time, I imagine Hugh thought

her a combination of all the charms and qualities very few real girls have got. He did not, however, then know me."

Hugh looked up and Harden smiled.

"We mustn't embarrass him and his proper reply is not very obvious, particularly since I am about. Constance might, of course, have got the better man, and you are, very nearly, the dearest little woman it has been my luck to know."

"At Winnipeg you were generous. You are a sportsman, Frank."

"I wonder——" said Harden in a quiet voice. "Although I might have excited doubts about my cousin, I could not exonerate myself. Perhaps it's strange, but I'm not yet altogether satisfied Mark was the man who ran away. The important thing is, it's done with. I am a Canadian farmer; I am not going back."

His glance swept the spacious landscape. Near the house, the belt of wheat and oats was touched by silver and yellow and flecks of copper red. Next year the belt would be wider, and by and by would sweep across the plain. Farther back, the grass melted from ochre and green to blue. On the horizon little scattered bluffs cut the sunset. Yet they, so to speak, were not in one plane, and when one looked closely, the horizon receded, as if the grass rolled on for ever.

"In twenty years the Old Country we knew will be gone," Harden resumed. "The prairie is ours, for us to mold. It will be what we make it, and while we get about the job it will put its stamp on us. Well, if Hugh is a typical frontiersman——"

"Hugh is a crackerjack," said Drummond, joining them. "The country's all right. So long as you are willing to sweat, you can meet your storekeepers' bill, but I begin to doubt if you'll soon get rich. For all the wheat pools and so forth, the merchant gang fix prices at the Board of

Trade, and the farmer pays for the city folks' extravagance. He always did pay. I reckon it was like that in Egypt when Pharo bought up the corn. Anyhow, we're not yet downhearted, and a tranquil mind in a sound body is something numerous city folks haven't got. But I'm not much of a philosopher and we want to be home by dark. Come on, Frank. All aboard!"

He kissed his wife, and with his foot on the wagon step, seized the reins. Frank went up the other side, wheels rattled, and the team plunged ahead. Anne put her rather thin hand in Hugh's.

"They are fine boys, and when they know their job I believe they'll go far," she said. "You, who know the obstacles, are soberer, but you will pass their farthest mark, and I want to help."

"Oh, well," said Hugh, "let's be practical. When I was at Winnipeg I went round the Seaton Adams store, and I saw some contraptions that ought to lighten your domestic chores. As soon as you are fit, we'll take a holiday excursion and buy the lot."

"You can kiss me for that," said Anne. "You do not like to be romantic, but sometimes you are a dear."

THE END

